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Velvet Face, THE BORDER BRAVO;

OR,

Muriel, the Danite's Bride.

THE ROMANCE OF A BORDER MYSTERY.

BY MAJOR DANGERFIELD BURR,

AUTHOR OF "BUFFALO BILL, THE BUCKSKIN
KING," "DASHING DANDY, THE HOT-
SPUR OF THE PLAINS," "CAPTAIN
CRIMSON," ETC., ETC.

PROLOGUE.

THE MASSACRE.

HARK! And the clear, ringing notes of a bugle floated down the canyon, sending back again a thousand echoes from rocky precipice, ravine and mountain, until there seemed a vast band swelling into delightful melody the solo of the trumpeter.

Played by a master, the stirring notes awoke half a hundred men from their noonday siesta, and brought them to their feet ready for action, while the bivouac, a short while before so calm a scene, became at once a busy mass of men, horses and pack-mules, preparing for the eastward march with their golden treasure, for those encamped in the canyon were men who had dug from the rich land of the setting sun, whose shores were washed by the Pacific, fortunes of yellow metal to bear back to the loved ones far away.

Hardships, dangers, disease and death had they faced, and from dawn to darkness had they toiled for gold, until at last success had been theirs, and they were homeward bound over mountain and plain, river and valley, with hopes of rest and comfort as they journeyed down life's hillside into the great beyond.

A few moments of confusion, and out of chaos came order, for a long line wound down the canyon at a swinging walk, that wearily, drearily cast the miles behind them.

And a strange mixture were these returning miners; for in their midst were the giant form, heavily-bearded, uncouth man whom riches

could never raise above the level his lot in life had been cast in, the hardy student who had given up books to dig for dross, the bankrupt of middle age, who had found another fortune to squander, the ex-soldier, adventurer, and a host of others from every walk in life, but all inured by their years in the mines to look death squarely in the face, confront foes as they would a stubborn rock beneath which lay a rich "lead," meet hardships with endurance, and determine to be victorious over any adversity.

Had they not been such men, they would have intrusted their treasure even to the treacherous sea and taken the Panama route, rather than risk the dangers of the overland.

And down the canyon they wound their way, until narrower and narrower it became, and the pine and spruce-bordered heights upon either side towered so far heavenward that the sun's rays penetrated not the depths between, and though but an hour past noonday shadows like nightfall fell upon the trail, and stilled with somber influence the voice of song, the hum of conversation and merry laugh, leaving only to be heard the hoof-falls of steeds and pack-



IN THAT FEARFUL MOMENT THE MAN DREW HIS REVOLVER TO AVENGE HIS OWN DEATH.

mules, that found echo against the rocks until it resounded like the heavy tread of a marching army.

But hark!

Like the roar of thunder comes a burst of sound, like vivid lightning runs a line of flame along the wooded sides of the canyon, and a hundred rifles have sent their leaden hail upon the serpent-like moving mass, and down in the dust fall men and horses, slain by an unseen foe.

Brave voices cry out to rally, brave men face toward their enemies, while the groans of the dying, the shrieks of wounded horses, the tramp of iron hoofs upon the flinty path, and the writhing, struggling mass of humanity and the brute creation, make up a scene in that shadowed valley which only the pencil of a Doré can portray, such a one as painted Dante's Inferno and the Wandering Jew.

To strike back was impossible; where to go none knew; to die in their tracks seemed their destiny, and there by their golden treasure brave men fell, writhed, groaned, cursed and prayed, until the rattling rifles from the hillsides ceased their deadly music, and Death stalked victor over the scene, while out of the dense shadows crept the foe to feast upon the fat treasure they had won.

THE PLEDGE.

In an elegant New York home, where an evidence of refinement and luxury met the eye at every glance, sat two persons, the one a man of forty-five, with a kindly face, and the air of one of aristocratic blood and good breeding; the other a maiden of wondrous beauty in face and form, such a face as only a pure woman could wear, and such a form as an artist would rave about.

Dressed with exquisite taste, she sat at the piano, idly running her fingers over the keys, and occasionally breaking forth in snatches of song, it being one moment a selection from an opera, the next a verse of some touching ballad.

"You seem moody to-night, Muriel," said the gentleman, laying aside his evening paper and turning toward the maiden.

"I feel despondent, father, yet why I know not; there seems a presentiment of evil resting upon my heart."

"On the contrary, my child, you should feel happy, as I do to-night, for to-day I paid off every debt, and have a surplus over, while, a month ago I was pressed against the wall, and failure and suicide stared me in the face."

"Oh, father! whatever misfortune overtakes you, never dream of taking your own life, for, if we were to become poor I could support you, thanks to the education you have given me; but I knew not that you were in straitened circumstances."

"Yes, I was, some time back, through my foolish speculations, and, as I said, was pressed to the wall; but, just in the nick of time, that returned Californian deposited a quarter of a million in money with me, and I am on my feet again."

"And should he withdraw it to-morrow, father?"

"My child, you frighten me! Don't think of such a thing, for my instant ruin will follow," and the banker turned white, and his hand trembled, while he fairly started as a liveried servant entered and handed him a card.

"It is Mr. Barton now, Muriel, and I have procrastinated in speaking to you about an offer he made me to-day for your hand—"

"Why, father, I have known him but a month, and—"

"And he is a very elegant gentleman, rich, handsome, and—"

"But I do not fancy him, sir."

"Never mind your fancy, my child— Ah! Mr. Barton, I am delighted to meet you, sir! My daughter you have met," and the banker greeted the tall, *distingué* looking man who entered the room, just as all bankers greet their wealthy depositors.

In a calm, self-possessed way, Philip Barton met his host, and bowing low to Muriel, said:

"Mr. Merle, I trust you will pardon my hasty call, after our conversation to-day; but I was so anxious to know my destiny, which Miss Merle holds in the hollow of her little hand, that I could not delay longer."

"Permit me, Mr. Barton, while thanking you for the honor done me, to say that your destiny and mine do not lead us to follow the same path in life," and Muriel Merle spoke with that air a well-bred woman knows so well how to assume in refusing the offer of a man she does not love, or even admire.

Mr. Merle started at her words, and the Californian bent his piercing gaze upon her, while a look of pain crossed his really very handsome face; but he was silent while the banker quickly said:

"My child, be not too hasty."

"I am not hasty, father, in deciding that which must make or mar my whole future life."

"May I ask, without seeming impertinence under the circumstances, if Miss Merle's affec-

tions are given to another?" and the Californian spoke in an earnest tone as though deeply moved.

"I will frankly answer you, sir, that I have never yet seen the man I could love, as I understand a woman should love the one whose name she is to bear, and whose honor she is to uphold," was the calm reply.

"Then I shall not press my suit upon unwilling ears, Miss Merle, though bitterly I regret that my dream of happiness has had such a bitter awakening."

"Had I been so fortunate, so honored, as to win your heart and hand, I would gladly have remained in New York, and placed in your father's hands a large sum to invest for me; but now there is no anchorage for me here, and, like an earless boat upon the sea, I must drift through the world, for there is no haven of rest for me."

"Farewell, Miss Merle, and my best wishes attend you; and you, Mr. Merle, I will see to-morrow, as I wish to draw out the sum I placed in your hands," and the Californian bowed himself out, leaving Muriel calm and silent, and Malcolm Merle pallid and trembling.

"Oh, God! Muriel, I am ruined, and you, my child, have ruined me," and the banker dropped into a chair and buried his face in his hands, while he groaned aloud.

"Father, cheer up, for what matters it if you do lose all? for you are yet young, and I am ready and willing to work for you; besides, I have friends who are not rich, and they certainly are happy," and she laid her soft, tiny hand upon her father's bowed head.

But he started as though it had been an adder's bite, while, springing to his feet he hissed forth:

"Girl, you do not understand! I say I am ruined, and I speak the truth, for Philip Barton's gold was deposited with me *in trust*, not to use, and I have used it all—oh, God! I am ruined, ruined!"

Again he dropped down in his despondent attitude, and with white face and set lips Muriel Merle stood beside him, while her bosom heaved with the emotion that convulsed her frame.

At last, after a second effort to speak, she said:

"Father, you have done wrong, ay, sinned; but it is not for me, your child, to upbraid you in your sorrow, but to cheer you, and I will."

"Go to Mr. Barton, at his hotel, bring him back with you, and tell him that it was but a woman's freak, my discarding him, and—and—that I knew not how—how—dear he was to me until he was gone; yes, tell him, *I will be his wife*."

She sunk down now by the side of her father, in whose eyes joy now shone, while he cried eagerly:

"Do you mean this, Muriel?"

"I do, father."

"You pledge yourself to become the wife of Philip Barton?"

"Yes, father, to save your honor, I give you my solemn pledge to become the wife of Philip Barton, one, two, or three months from to-day, if so he wills it."

"Thank God! Muriel, you have saved me," and with a kiss upon the fair forehead, Malcolm Merle hastened away to the hotel of the rich Californian, but leaving behind him a heart throbbing with anguish.

THE WARNING.

A third time the scene shifts, and back to the Far West again, amid the wilds of the frontier, where then the savage Indian, the more savage white renegade, and the wild beast held full sway, while now they remain only by the sufferance of the march of civilization.

Ascending a rugged hill, or rather mountain spur, is a train of wagons, the bullwhacker's whips cracking loudly in chorus, causing a sound like a mimic battle of riflemen, and the tired teams struggling hard to gain the summit, for the guide has reported that beyond the ridge lies the promised land of their hopes, the valley in which they are to settle, and where already are men toiling in the rich mines for yellow gold.

A few more hours of toil and the Eldorado will be reached, and tired nature can find repose after the turmoil, fatigue and dangers of the long march westward.

The pioneers who had gone before them had, in their ecstatic delight at finding a haven of beauty, surrounded by untold riches, given the settlement the name of Paradise Valley, while not inappropriately the little hamlet of trade shops that had sprung up near the mining camps, had been named Purgatory, for there was the root of all evil to the settlement, and drinking, gambling and bartering held supreme sway.

The guide, a tall, fair-haired, hazel-eyed, fearless-faced buckskin knight, had ridden on ahead of the toiling train, and, reaching the summit of the hill, had halted his horse, and silently contemplated the beautiful scene spread out at his feet.

Beyond him rose the mountain heights, and far below him, between them and the ridge

upon which he stood, lay Paradise Valley, a scene of beauty that the eye could not tire in gazing upon, for the lovely landscape was dotted here and there with settlers' cabin homes, a crystal stream glided along the center of the vale, and in the distance, beneath rugged mountain sides, were the mining camps, from which columns of blue smoke curled upward, for it was noonday, and the toilers for gold were cooking their dinners, during the hour of rest they allowed themselves.

Almost at his feet, for the spur broke off in craggy precipices, lay the hamlet of Purgatory, and along its one street of rude huts and shanties, men and women were seen going to and fro.

Taking from his pocket a small flag, the stars and stripes, the guide fastened it upon the branch of a spruce-tree, and the wind floated it out so as to catch the eye of the train coming up the rugged mountain road.

Then he mounted his horse and turning sharply to the right, began the descent to the valley, to select a good camping-place there for his train.

Hardly had he disappeared in the somber shadow of the pines that, with spruce and live-oaks, dotted the mountain sides, when another person drew rein upon the summit of the hill, and, glancing first at the fluttering flag, then looked down into Paradise Valley, while an exclamation of delight and surprise broke from her lips—for it was a woman.

Yes, a woman splendidly mounted, and attired in a close-fitting habit of dark gray, while a sombrero of like hue, and with a black ostrich plume, sheltered her head.

Beautiful she certainly was, with her wealth of golden hair, dark eyes and perfect features, while the rich blood of health tinted her face, bronzed as it was by the long march over plain and mountain.

As she raises her eyes to the upper end of the valley and lets them slowly sweep over the whole scene, the reader recognizes Muriel Merle, no longer the inmate of her palatial home in New York, no longer the reigning belle and petted child of fortune, but one of a train of gold-seekers following westward the star of empire.

What fate has been hers that she has given up the splendors of civilization for the rough camps in the wilderness?

Let the sequel answer the query.

Presently she starts, for a form suddenly glides out of the shadow of an overhanging tree and stands like a statue upon a rock not twenty paces from her.

In awe Muriel Merle gazes upon the seeming apparition.

Relieved against the dark background of the rock, upon a base of which she stood, it serving as a pedestal, was a woman, and yet seemingly a child in the girlish beauty of her face—a face as white as marble, and as clearly cut, and with eyes, brows and hair as black as ink.

Her dress was of the finest skins, and pure white, consisting of a close-fitting waist, a tunic of the same material dropping to her knees, from whence fringed buckskin leggings descended to her ankles, where they were met by beaded moccasins.

Her feet and hands were extremely small, her arms bare to the shoulder, and upon her head was a sombrero, trimmed with small feathers of every hue.

In one hand she carried a long lance, which also served the purpose of a crook, as one end had a curved horn on it, to aid in ascending and descending the mountain steeps, and in her belt were a pair of small, silver-mounted revolvers and a jewel-hilted knife, while at her back was slung a bow and a double quiver of arrows.

"Who are you, beautiful creature?" asked Muriel, awed by her sudden coming and strange appearance.

"I am one come to warn thee of danger! Go not thou to yonder valley, but turn thy back upon this land of crime and death!" said the woman, in an impressive, distinct tone.

"But there lies our destination, and our dangers are over," responded Muriel.

"Not so, your dangers are but begun, and I warn thee and thine to turn back ere it be too late."

"But what have we to fear?" persisted Muriel.

"Much! everything! I have warned you, lady; will you not heed my warning?"

"Alas! I cannot, for my destiny has led me to this far-away land, and here I must remain," replied Muriel, sadly.

"So be it; I have warned you and you heed it not. Beware!"

Abruptly she turned, and nimbly springing up the rocks disappeared from sight, leaving Muriel Merle deeply impressed with what she had seen and heard.

"Ah me! the die is cast and there is no hope for me to retrace my steps," and, with a sigh, Muriel Merle turned to greet others of the train who just then rode up and joined her; each one breaking into cries of rapture at their first glimpse of Paradise Valley, for they saw not beneath their feet Purgatory lurking in the shadow.

CHAPTER I.
THE VIGILANTES.

"THEY has got 'em, pards, ther nigger, Chinees, Dutch, Injun an' Irish, an' is a-fetchin' 'em to ther tribunal o' justice."

The speaker was a large, heavily-bearded miner, dressed in a red flannel shirt, corduroy pants stuck in his boot-tops, and wearing a slouch hat a little the worse for wear, and armed with the ever necessary revolver and bowie-knife.

He had just entered a group of miners from Paradise Valley mines, but frequenters of Purgatory City, as the settlers had called the trading hamlet, and they were gathered in a rocky canyon, discussing some important reforms for the new settlement, as affairs had not been working right of late, for a few mysterious murders had been committed in their midst, cunning robberies had been perpetrated, and two men had been seized and hanged, who, the day after, were found to have been wholly innocent of the crime, as they could have proven had they been given time.

The very night after the summary execution, a miner had been killed in his little shanty, and others had been robbed, so the Vigilantes, self-appointed, had assembled to regulate matters, and commenced by ordering the arrest of the foreigners in the settlement.

"They has 'em all, Kansas Kit?" announced Captain Carl, the Vigilante leader, who had been chosen more on account of the awe with which he was looked upon, and his well-known cruel nature, than for his virtues.

A man of huge frame and powerful build, he possessed a face that was stamped ineffaceably with vice and cruelty, and the man who dared to brave him in personal encounter was almost certain to meet with instant death.

Hated by all, he was yet fawned upon by many, and having had one of his satellites propose him as Captain of the Vigilantes, none dare dispute the place with him, or at least cared to do so, for his strength was well known, and his skill with revolver and knife had been too often seen to be doubted.

A crowd of nearly a hundred men had gathered in the canyon, and their faces showed the excitement of the moment, and all eyes turned in the direction from whence Kansas Kit had come, and the mass of humanity swayed impatiently.

Presently there came in sight a group of a dozen men, six of whom were prisoners, for they were securely bound and were being dragged along by their captors.

One glance into the faces of those six, and pity would well up in almost a heart of stone, for the unprotected in the settlement had certainly been picked out as victims of Vigilante justice.

Entering the canyon the captives were placed in line, fronting their captors, and a motley set they were, for at the head stood a stately, noble-looking Indian of the Bannock tribe, facing his accusers with unflinching mien, while by his side was a young girl of his own blood, and with a striking face, and form of rare grace for a red-skin.

Both were dressed in the costumes of their tribe, and neither showed a tremor of fear, which was in strange contrast to the other four captives, an Irishman, a German, a negro and a Chinese.

These latter had drifted into Paradise Valley, the Irishman and German working diligently in the mines, the Chinese and negro doing general chores about the camp, and earning thereby a precarious living, while Blue Snake and Red Dove, the Indians, were wont to bring into the settlement game, and dressed buckskin and beaded moccasins to sell.

Upon these six, the "furriners" of the Valley, as they were called, the wrath of Captain Carl had turned, and by various arguments he had led his comrades to believe that upon their heads rested the crimes committed in the settlement and camps.

"Waal, yer furrin trash, we has yer at last, an' I'm thinkin' this camp are goin' ter be a virtuous resort, when we has strung yer up," said Captain Carl, in his hoarse, cruel tones, at the same time sweeping his eye down the line, and allowing it to rest upon Black Brick, as the negro was called.

"Lordy, massa, I isn't done nothin', sah; I is a 'spectable member o' ther church, an' I never stold nothin' more'n a chaw o' tobaccy an' a drink o' licker, sah; 'fo'e de Lord, I hasn't, massas," and Brick looked piteously into the faces of the stern men around him.

"Dat ish so, mine frints; t'e nigger is as goot ash I pe," put in Yacob Holstein, lugubriously, while the Chinese added quickly:

"Goodee! allee samee likee Chinaman; me too goodee, too goodee."

"You are affther being a goodee liar, you h'athen, and it's meself as thinks it's you has got us into trouble. Hang him up, gintlemen, an' spare the rest o' us, barrin' ther Ingines, an' divil a bit does it matter what yez is affther doin' with them same," and Murphy Maginnis looked proudly around, as though he expected to see his advice instantly followed.

But, comical as the situation looked, in spite

of its serious aspect, there was no smile on the stern faces bent on the captain's, and Captain Carl said to the Indians:

"Have you no chin-music to give us, reds?"

"The Blue Snake fears not to die; he is a great chief," was the calm response.

"But ther gal will squeal when she feels ther rope on her neck."

A smile of scorn crossed the fearless face of the maiden, and she answered:

"The Red Dove will fold her wings and die when the Great Spirit calls her to the village where her people wait her up there," and she pointed her hand upward.

"Waal, pards, we has ther furriners al afore us, and they is suspected o' bein' ther guilty parties, who has been murderin' an' thievin' in our midst, an' tho' we was mistaken in stringin' up Joe Race and Bricktop Bob, we can't make a mistake *this time*, so my idee is ter hang these folks an' let ther futur' show we was correct."

The words of Captain Carl found ready assent from many, though there were a few who pitied the prisoners, having never seen them guilty of wrong; but the late assassinations in the settlement, and the robberies, which proved the life of none of them was safe, kept them from giving utterance to their feelings, in the hope that the mysterious crimes would cease, and a short talk among the Vigilantes resulted in the almost unanimous decision to hang the poor victims.

"I guess you won't hang the Injun gal, pards," suddenly said Dick Hazel, a handsome young miner, who had been pacing to and fro on the outside of the crowd, with a young man of slender form, and a classical face, strangely out of place it seemed in that wild region, and whose miner's suit, though made of the best material, seemed not such as one like him should wear.

"I guesses we *will* hang the gal, Dick Hazel. She's nothin' but a Injun, an' I'm thinkin' she's been doing ther stealin' while her old father has been doin' ther killin'," answered Captain Carl, roughly.

"Then why hang ther others, Carl, if those two is guilty?" asked Dick Hazel.

Had any other man in Paradise Valley than Dick Hazel asked Captain Carl, or Carl the Killer, as he was familiarly called, why he did, or did not, do such a thing, he would have made the query at the risk of his life, for a brawl would have followed; but Dick Hazel was liked by all, and no nobler specimen of manhood dwelt in the mines than he was, while, when aroused he was known to be a most dangerous antagonist.

"I has my suspicions on 'em all, Dick Hazel, an' ther Vigilantes says they must be strung up," replied Captain Carl, quietly, though his eyes flashed with anger.

"With Dick Hazel, I think the girl should not suffer; in fact, I do not believe any of them guilty of the crimes they are charged with."

All eyes turned upon the speaker. It was Guy Godfrey, the "Pard" of Hazel, and the school-teacher of the settlement.

"Look a-heur, Guy Godfrey, you is in these diggin's ter teach kids out o' books, an' not ter chip yer chin in whar yer is not invited," angrily said Captain Carl.

"I was invited to this meeting of the Vigilantes, and I have a right to an opinion, where I believe murder most foul is to be perpetrated," was the fearless response.

Instantly Captain Carl dropped his hand upon his revolver, but Dick Hazel's quiet words checked him ere he drew it.

"Hold on, Carl the Killer, my pard has a right to an opinion, and I agrees with him; but then I suppose we two will go for nothing in this crowd."

"You is right; we intends ter hang ther gal," cried Captain Carl, angrily.

"Did I hear aright, gentlemen, that you intend to hang a woman?"

At the strange voice all turned quickly, and every eye fell upon a horseman who had unseen ridden into the canyon, and halting just outside the crowd, was calmly gazing upon them, and with a look that seemed to read every face it rested upon.

"Waal, who in thunder is *you*?" cried Captain Carl, in angry, loud tones, to which, in strange contrast, came the low, calm, yet perfectly distinct response:

"Back on the plains, where I am known, men call me *Velvet Face, the Border Bravo*."

CHAPTER II.

VELVET FACE, THE BORDER BRAVO.

The announcement of the strange horseman seemed to cause universal amazement, and a murmur ran over the crowd, to not one of whom he seemed to be personally known, though the name he bore all had heard, and connected with some thrilling deed of daring.

The man was one to arrest attention in any crowd, and under any circumstances; but there in that wild fastness he riveted the gaze of every eye, even to the captive Indians.

From his thoroughbred black horse of exquisite beauty, with his superb saddle and silver-studded Mexican trappings, the eyes of the miners ranged to the rider, and a low hum of

admiration went from lip to lip, while the object of their gaze seemed utterly indifferent to the surprise his coming had occasioned, and gazed upon the stern, bearded faces before him with a smile of womanly sweetness.

Above the medium height by several inches, and possessing a form of rare elegance, but in which a casual observer even would have discovered leonine activity and lion strength, he sat his saddle with a firm and graceful seat that proved him to be a perfect horseman.

His name, Velvet Face, naturally caused those who did not know him to search for the cause of such a strange cognomen, and a glance was sufficient to show them that it was not a misnomer, for his complexion was rich, unmarred by a blemish, and tinted with a delicacy that would have driven a metropolitan belle mad with envy, while his features were effeminate in their beauty, until the decision on the lip, and the strong character underlying the bright smile hovering about the mouth became visible from deep emotion.

With eyes large, black, dreamy to sadness, his velvety skin, beardless face, pearly teeth and waving masses of red-gold hair, falling below his shoulders, he was one to fascinate both men and women by his really weird beauty, while his costume also won a searching, though rapid inspection from the rough men into whose midst he had so unexpectedly and suddenly appeared.

A velvet jacket of dark blue, slashed and braided, gray corduroy pants, adorned with bell buttons down the outer seams, and stuck into high and shapely cavalry boots that were armed with gold spurs, a broad Spanish sombrero encircled by a bullion cord, and looped up on the left side with a pin representing the hideous emblem of a skull and cross-bones, a repeating rifle at his back, revolvers and knifes in the belt that was around his extremely small waist, and you have the costume and equipment of the strange character that had so fearfully disturbed the Vigilante meeting.

From the handsome stranger the miners turned their eyes upon Captain Carl, who had suddenly stepped to the front, a look of contempt upon his face for the man whose dress and appearance made him appear like a fancy cavalier, and in tones that were meant to strike awe to the heart of the horseman he shouted:

"Waal, young feller, yer may be cal't ther Border Bravo whar yer come from, but heur yer has ter buck ag'in' men, ef yer 'spects ter hold a grip on thet title."

It was evident that Captain Carl had taken a fancy to the stranger's horse and arms, and meant business, and all looked on with bated breath.

But Velvet Face did not change color in the least, or lose the sweet smile hovering about his mouth, as he answered:

"My dear fellow, one cannot expect to go through the world without trouble, and I am not an exception."

"I have heard of your beautiful valley and rich mines, and that as brave a set of men dwelt here as could be found from Kansas City to California, and yet I ride up just in time to hear one who appears their leader say that he intends to hang a woman."

"Waal, what then, yer velvet-faced dandy?" was the insolent response of Captain Carl, who, with the others, had listened attentively to the stranger's words.

"Why, I say that you will do no such a thing."

Carl the Killer was astounded, and so were all others present, for though the man before them, if he was really he whom he said he was, had the reputation of being a plainsman of remarkable skill and daring, they had not expected to see him show such utter recklessness of life, as to place himself against a band of a hundred Vigilantes.

As for Captain Carl, he was breathless with fury, and stepping still closer to the horseman, he fairly shrieked:

"Yer infernal imp o' Satan, I'll shake ther life out o' yer, an' gi'n yer ter ther dogs fer food."

Quick as a flash of light the man was upon the ground, and one of his gold-mounted revolvers looked squarely in the face of the bully, while he said in a stern voice:

"I have the drop on you, Carl of Colorado, and I'll make you eat that lie."

"Boys, shoot the hound, for he's greased lightning on ther draw and move, an' he's got me sartin," whined the bully, and several revolvers were at once drawn, but Velvet Face, with his eye still on his foe, said:

"Men, I am one among a hundred, and it's not in Paradise Valley miners to play an unfair game; this fellow has said he would hang a woman, and also threatened to feed me to the dogs, and I say he shall not do either, for I'll prove him a whining cur with any weapons he may select, or without arms."

"You are preachin' now, pardner, and I'm in ther chair, along with my cabin mate here," and Dick Hazel stepped forward, accompanied by Guy Godfrey, and their example was followed by many more, though a number remained on the side of Carl the Killer, partly

from fear, and partly because they knew what he was capable of, and believed he would certainly be victorious.

"I'm yer man, my pretty, ef yer means fight," said the captain.

"That is just what I do mean, and I shall force you to fight; so now, what shall it be with?"

"I promised ter shake ther life out o' yer, didn't I?"

"Yes."

"Then drap yer weepins an' I'll do it."

"Lay your belt of arms aside, and I'll give mine to this gentleman, as you seem too cowardly to meet me with knife or revolver," was the calm response.

"Curse you," cried Captain Carl, nettled at the words; "does yer call me a coward?"

"Certainly; what else are you but a huge bully relying upon your brute strength?"

With a howl of rage Captain Carl seemed about to risk a shot and spring upon his cool and provoking adversary; but there was something in the handsome, smiling face and tremorless hand that held the revolver that warned him off, and he hoarsely said:

"Drap yer shootin'-iron and meet me with yer knife, as yer plays so game."

"Willingly; it is a matter of utter indifference to me what I kill you with," was the smiling response, and drawing his revolvers from his belt he handed them to Dick Hazel, with a manner the perfect *acme* of indifference, and which called forth the remark from Kansas Kit:

"Waal, he's a cool one, he is, an' I guesses he's got sand ter back him up."

Seeing that he must meet his enemy Captain Carl also threw aside his revolvers, and drew his long knife, and a ring having formed around the two men, every eye was riveted upon them, the six prisoners, whose summary execution his coming had interrupted, gazing upon Velvet Face with a kind of fascination, and that, in the case of four of them, was piteous to behold.

As they faced each other, Captain Carl it was seen was the taller and heavier man of the two, and his strength all knew; but there was that in the lithe form, broad shoulders and well-rounded limbs of the stranger, that proved he would not be so easily handled as at first had been supposed, while in striking contrast was the beauty of his face to the brutal countenance of the huge miner.

"Are you ready, Carl of Colorado?" asked the stranger, and a second time the bully started as his name came from the other's lips, and he said gruffly:

"Yer knows me, does yer?"

"It matters not; are you ready, Carl of Colorado?" was the evasive reply.

"Yas, Velvet Face, an' yer time has come," and with a yell, Carl the Killer sprung upon his adversary, while a cry of warning broke from half a hundred lips at his treacherous act.

CHAPTER III.

TO THE RESCUE!

ALTHOUGH confident in his own prowess and strength, Carl of Colorado was treacherous, and even in a combat with the most insignificant antagonist took every unfair advantage in his power.

Hence it was, when he believed that Velvet Face was expecting him to approach warily, he sprung upon him suddenly to catch him off his guard.

But Captain Carl, shrewd as he was, and quick as had been his panther-like spring, had reckoned wrong, for his foe did not step back even, but caught his blade on his own, and turned it with a skill and strength that nearly threw the huge miner on his face, for he lost his equilibrium, and a curse broke from his lips, as he expected Velvet Face to quickly follow up his advantage and drive his knife into him ere he could prevent.

The sudden skill and strength exhibited by Velvet Face, and the suave smile resting upon his face, raised him at once in the estimation of the crowd, and they gathered more closely around, feeling confident now that it was not to be a one-sided affair, as they had feared.

His not following up his advantage over the man who had been treacherous toward him also gained him other friends than Dick Hazel and Guy Godfrey, and this Captain Carl discovered and determined to put a stop to, by at once annihilating his enemy by a fierce onslaught, and immediately he pressed the fighting, and once more the blades clashed together, and there remained for an instant.

It was a fearful tableau, and not a sound broke the silence, as the two men, with arms upraised, the blades pressed together, neither yielding under the powerful pressure, and gazing into each other's eyes, stood, the one before the other, Captain Carl's face black with passion, his eyes glaring and his broad breast heaving, and Velvet Face cool, determined, and with that same smile upon his lips, which the lookers-on now began to know was an indication of danger rather than mirth.

At length Captain Carl again pressed the attack, by quickly withdrawing his blade from

against his foe's, and after a feint at a thrust, attempting to bring it down with terrific force upon the broad breast of his enemy, and a movement that again caused a cry of alarm to break from the crowd, for what could break, or check the weight of that huge arm in its descent? was the thought that flashed through every brain.

But it was broken in its downward motion, and the wrist was caught in a gripe of iron, and bent with a force that wrung a shriek of pain from the lips of Captain Carl, while Velvet Face, throwing aside his knife, seized with his right hand the throat of his enemy, and with a power that seemed supernatural, and which brought a burst of applause from the miners, the huge bully was bent backward, and his feet, by a sudden kick, knocked from under him, causing him to fall heavily to the earth, yet still in the vise-like grasp that held him.

At his fall another cry of admiration arose on all sides; but unheeding it, Velvet Face wrenched the knife of Captain Carl from his grasp, and bending over him, he said, as he pressed the point hard over his heart:

"I have a mind to kill you, Carl of Colorado, but I do not wish my hands stained with your vile blood, so give you your life; but steer clear of my path."

Springing back he allowed the man to rise, but ere he could seize upon his revolvers, Captain Carl found himself again covered by one in the hands of his victor, and he hissed forth:

"Pards, I is yer leader, and I calls on yer ter captur' thet iron-armed devil."

"No, Carl of Colorado, you are no longer the Bravo of Paradise Valley, for I've a notion to that title myself; now begone, or I'll string you up for trying to hang those six innocent creatures there."

"You has earned ther champion belt, pard, an' yer deserves it," said Hazel Dick, in a loud tone, and Captain Carl saw at half a glance that it would not be safe for him to tarry longer, so he turned away sullenly, with a look on his face that meant no good to Velvet Face, should he ever catch him at a disadvantage.

"Gentlemen," and Velvet Face looked smilingly over the crowd, "I am happy to have arrived in time to save those you would have hanged for crimes of which they are innocent, for on my way to your valley I came upon two scamps who have been the black sheep of your settlement by their own confession, and I beg to present them to you, for they lie bound behind yonder rock."

A dozen men darted to the spot, and in an instant they returned dragging after them two miners well known to all present, but who had several weeks before started, they had said, for the California gold-fields.

"In that bag across my saddle is the metal they had robbed their victims of, and I overheard their plans to make another effort to get more gold, and then start for other scenes; they are the ones who need hanging," was the significant ending to the words of Velvet Face.

Instantly the hint was acted upon, and the pleading, praying wretches at once saw that their doom was sealed.

"They shall hang for it," cried Kansas Kit, and a hundred voices echoed his words, while twice as many eyes were turned upward at the bare limb of a storm-shattered live-oak, and in an incredibly short space of time the two forms were dangling in the air, the victims of Vigilante justice.

But, as all eyes were turned upon them, there came an exclamation of surprise, as there was seen upon the height above the form of a horse and rider, plainly relieved against the blue sky.

But, strangest of all, the rider was a woman, young and beautiful, and her eyes were gazing down upon the sickening scene far below her, while she, to those in the valley, seemed like an apparition, and a thrill of horror ran through the heart of nearly every miner.

And, as they gazed spellbound, they saw several dark forms spring from a covert near by, seize her horse, and dart away out of sight, while to their ears came the thrilling, pleading cry:

"Save me! Oh, save me!"

"By Heaven, I will," was shouted back in ringing tones from their midst, and throwing himself upon the back of his splendid black steed, Velvet Face cried as the animal bounded out of the canyon:

"On, Midnight, for there's work ahead!"

Like an arrow from a bow the fleet horse sped away, while, up the steep side of the canyon, where the wild mountain sheep could hardly find footing, clambered two forms toward the spot where the maiden had been seen.

Those two were the Bannocks, Blue Snake and Red Dove.

CHAPTER IV.

THE MASKED RIDERS.

IN one of the three scenes, pen-painted in the prologue, the reader will remember Muriel Merle as having been joined upon the mountain spur that overlooked Paradise Valley by others of her party, who, like herself, were breaking

the monotony of the long march by riding on horseback.

As if preferring her own company to that of others, Muriel quietly turned away, leaving her companions rapt in admiration at the beauty of the scene spread out before them, and rode down the rough way leading to the valley below, and the same which had been taken by the handsome guide, Ralph Reno.

Reaching another jutting cliff further down the mountain side, Muriel rode almost to the edge and glanced down into the canyon a hundred feet below her.

Instantly her eyes sparkled, for they fell upon a strange scene, one which was wholly new to her, and full of intense excitement, for she beheld the group of miners in the canyon, and the six bound prisoners whom they were to punish, more to gratify their passions than because they deemed them guilty.

Spellbound she sat on her horse and gazed upon the scene, while every word uttered came distinctly to her ears, and her noble heart bled for those who were to be the victims of Vigilante justice.

Yet she dare not cry out and beg for them mercy, for how would she, a strange girl, be able to wield influence among that rude band of men?

Eagerly her eyes scanned the different faces, and when Dick Hazel and his pard spoke in favor of the prisoners, she held hope for them, which, alas! was but short-lived, for she saw that Captain Carl held undisputed power.

"I will cry out and beg for them; they are men, rude and rough though they be, and they will listen to me," she said aloud, as Captain Carl said that Red Dove should die also, and the words were upon her lips almost to bid them hold in their murderous work, when suddenly Velvet Face had appeared upon the scene.

"Oh! where have I seen that face before?" she asked herself, as like a statue she sat upon her horse, her ears drinking in every word that was said.

"A fearless, splendid man he is, to face those madmen thirsting for blood, and how strangely out of place he seems in their midst," she again said, half aloud, as she eagerly watched all that was transpiring below her.

At length, as she saw Captain Carl spring upon Velvet Face, a cry of alarm broke from her lips, which, in the excitement reigning in the canyon none heard, and once more she muttered:

"That face! Oh! where have I seen it before? It comes back before me now like a dream of the past."

With bated breath and staring eyes she watched the knife encounter between the two men, and it was with the greatest effort at self-control that she restrained herself from a shout of joy at the fall of Captain Carl.

But, as she sat with riveted eyes upon the scene below, she saw not that danger threatened her, and even her faithful horse seemed too deeply taken up with glancing down into the canyon, to observe dark forms stealing out of the shadow of a pine thicket and cautiously and slowly creep toward them.

Nearer and nearer they came to their victim, five stalwart men, dressed in deep black, and wearing over their faces masks of cloth, that shielded them from all recognition, while their hands were gloved, as if to hide even the hue of their skin.

In their belts were revolvers and a bowie-knife, and in their cautious, panther-like approach upon the maiden, they showed the evidence of men trained well in the school of border craft and deviltry.

Nearer and nearer, until they came close enough for the fatal spring, like tigers upon their prey, and the next instant the startled horse was in a grasp of iron, and Muriel Merle was a captive.

One loud cry for aid she gave, and then her horse was forced back from the sight of those in the canyon, and two mounted men darted from the thicket, and placed themselves upon either side of her, while one said sternly:

"Mount, men, and follow, for that cry will bring the hounds upon our path."

Muriel glanced at the speaker, but he too was masked, and seeing her look, he said, in the same stern tone:

"If you wish to avoid trouble for yourself, my lady, you will go willingly with us; but if you cry out, or struggle, I shall have to gag and bind you, for we have run a fearful risk to secure you."

"But who are you, and why am I thus rudely borne away?" asked Muriel, indignantly.

"That the chief will make known to you; come, men, let us not tarry," and the leader urged the horses forward, turning from the wagon road into a narrow trail leading back into the mountains.

"Your chief; who is he?"

"Wait and see," was the short response, and again turning to his men, the leader said:

"We will make a *detour* round this spur, and then descend by the Devil's Ladder, men."

"It's taking terrible chances, captain," was the response, while the other men glanced at

each other, and by their actions seemed strangely nervous.

"True, but we must take the chances; come, we go over the mountain, and then down by the Devil's Ladder," and the leader wheeled out of the trail, directly up the steep mountain side, Muriel silently following, with a fearlessness and command of her horse that showed her to be a perfect equestrienne.

Though taking her capture coolly, to outward appearance, and acquiescing in the orders of the leader, Muriel Merle was not one to give up hope, and her bright eyes were open to any chance of escape that she might deem feasible; while she muttered to her horse, as she bent over and patted his neck:

"There may come a chance, Featherhoof, when you can try your speed against these gaunt-looking steeds; an thou lovest me, don't fail me then."

The faithful animal gave a low whinny in response, as though understanding her, and as though anticipating her intention, the leader said:

"You need hope for no opportunity to escape, be your horse ever so swift, for Death is the only thing that can release you from the power of the chief."

"Then Death shall be my friend, if need be," was the fearless response, and then on in silence, excepting the strokes of their horses' hoofs, the party wound their way up the rugged mountain side, while fainter and fainter in the distance was heard the cracking of the teamsters' whips, and their cries to their teams to urge them on their way.

At last the sounds from the toiling train were no longer heard, and Muriel's heart almost sunk with despair, for the last link seemed broken that bound her to those she loved.

Then there flashed through her mind a thought that flushed her face.

That thought was:

"If he who calls himself Velvet Face heard my cry for help, he can save me, and will."

CHAPTER V.

DOWN THE DEVIL'S LADDER.

AFTER a hard climb over the mountain, to throw any pursuers that might follow, off their trail, the Masked Riders, with their fair captive, still hopeful in spite of her danger, began the descent of the other side.

"Kennedy," suddenly called out the leader.

"Yes, captain," answered one of the men, the one who rode upon the other side of Muriel.

"I have an idea that we will be hotly pursued, and to throw the hounds off our scent, you take two men with you, those that are the best mounted, and go by the way of the Devil's Ladder, for it will give you a gain of ten miles."

"And the lady, sir?"

"She goes with you, for she must not be retaken; do you understand?"

"Yes, captain; but if it be impossible to keep her against overwhelming numbers?"

"You know your duty," was the stern response.

"You mean I shall—"

The man paused, but touched the hilt of his knife significantly, and Muriel saw the act and shuddered.

"Yes," came in an ominous tone from the leader's lips.

"And you, captain?" queried the man addressed as Kennedy.

"Will keep the road with the rest of the men, and the pursuit will follow us, not you, and I will contest every step until you have reached the cavern, and then she is safe from recapture."

"I will obey, captain; see, there is where we separate," and Kennedy pointed to where the broad trail circling around the mountain was visible, and in a few minutes more they came to a halt in it.

"Now, Kennedy, you know what I expect of you, so do it."

"I will, captain; come, lady, you go with me," and seizing the bridle-rein of Muriel's horse, the man rode away, followed by two of his comrades, whom the leader told to follow him.

Seeing them disappear in a pine copse, the leader also rode on, following the trail around the mountain.

"Lady, you have shown that you possess courage and nerve; you will need all your pluck in a few moments to face a danger few men dare face."

Muriel turned slightly more pale than she was, but asked calmly:

"What is the danger I have to face that is greater than being in the power of such wretches as you have proven yourselves?"

"Ha! ha! ha!" laughed the man at the shot he received, while he replied:

"Oh! you will face the ordeal without flinching; but that is a severe shot, lady, from one so lovely."

Muriel made no reply, and kept her eyes steadily before her to seek for the danger she was told she must meet.

Soon she discovered a large live-oak, growing upon the very edge of what seemed a precipice, and beneath its shadow her captors called a

halt, while Kennedy said in a tone that seemed a little nervous:

"Prepare yourselves, men, for the Ladder, and you, lady, bring all your nerve to bear, for you see that precipice before you?"

"Yes."

"Well, from yonder edge leads a path, running around the side of the mountain, and broken here and there with steps; it is half a mile long, quite steep, and will conduct us to the valley below."

"Well?" quietly asked Muriel, as Kennedy paused.

"It is but three feet wide at its greatest width, and at one place but two and a quarter."

In spite of her great courage Muriel Merle shuddered and her lip quivered; but she made no reply, and watched the movements of two of her captors, who had dismounted and tightened their saddle-girths, and then thrown one stirrup over to the other side, after which they again mounted their trembling horses, who seemed to understand the fearful danger that threatened them.

"Now hold this rein while I look after our girths," said Kennedy, dismounting, as he threw the rein of Muriel's bridle to one of his comrades, the act causing the fair captive to compress her lips angrily, for she had determined, when he also dismounted, to wheel Featherhoof suddenly and ride for her life.

Thwarted in her plan of escape, Muriel silently watched the man tighten her saddle-girths and his own, and remount his horse, sitting sideways, as did his comrades.

"Come, lady, follow me, for I will lead the way, and hold your horse well in hand, for a stumble will be instant death."

In silence the maiden obeyed, and the party moved forward to the edge of the precipice, over which the spreading branches of the massive live-oak hung.

Just as Muriel came to where she could look over, Kennedy, with a word of caution, urged his trembling horse to take the shelf of rock, for it was nothing more, that jutted out from the cliff, and, like an artificial gangway, ran around the wall of rock, gradually descending toward the valley five hundred feet below.

After a moment's hesitation Featherhoof, to Muriel's regret, followed the horse of Kennedy, and behind her came the other two, the three men, by riding sideways, saving their legs from being crushed, for the animals pressed against the rocky wall, with a force that threatened to tear their saddles from their backs.

"Do not look down, lady; keep your eyes upon the head of your horse, and give him full rein," warned Kennedy, but without glancing around, for he hardly dared move a muscle, for fear of causing the animal he was mounted upon to lose his equilibrium, and topple over into the abyss below.

Upright, white as a corpse, with lips firm set, and hand as firm as iron, Muriel Merle began the fearful descent of the Devil's Ladder, as the rocky and narrow path was appropriately called, while before and behind her were her captors, showing less nerve than the young girl they were perhaps bearing to a far worse fate than death.

"Steady now, for this is what we call the first round in the Ladder, lady," warned Kennedy, and slowly his horse made the step down of nearly a foot, and with equal caution Featherhoof and the other animals followed.

"Bravo! you have a nerve of iron, lady; and we are half-way down now," again said Kennedy, after a pause of a few moments of horror, in which several more "rounds" in the Ladder had been passed.

Muriel made no reply, and once more her captor spoke, as they came to a turn in the shelf-path:

"Here, lady, we come to the narrowest part of the Ladder; just two and a quarter feet from the wall to the edge, and for the distance of forty feet, just around the brow of the mountain, and with two hundred feet of empty space beneath us, and rocks to catch us below."

"You paint a cheerful picture, kidnapper Kennedy," said Muriel, speaking for the first time since the fearful descent had commenced, and without a sign of tremor in her tones.

"And you are the bravest woman I ever saw—Great God! see there!"

And well might the cry break from the man's lips, for, just as the four horses were on the narrowest part of the ledge, and pressing hard against the wall, suddenly in the path before them appeared a horseman.

All at once came to a halt, for instinctively the animals knew their danger, and that there could be no passing there; but with the cry of horror that burst from Kennedy, came an exclamation of joy from Muriel Merle, for in the horseman before her she recognized Velvet Face, the Border Bravo.

CHAPTER VI.

WHICH MUST IT BE?

FOLLOWING the glad cry of Muriel Merle, came two startled exclamations from the men behind her that she could not understand.

Certainly they had seen the horseman in their front, for they had echoed Kennedy's cry of horror; could a double danger be facing them, she wondered?

And her woman's nature conquering prudence, she turned her head, and, like Lot's wife, glanced behind her.

What she saw, that had so startled the two captors following her, was a tall form in the path behind them, with one hand holding a bow sprung back, the other ready to let go the arrow-head and send it on its flight.

Almost reeling from her saddle at the sight, for she recognized in the form behind her the Indian captive of the Vigilantes, Muriel turned her gaze upon the noble black horse that barred their way, and then upon the handsome, smiling face of the rider, who sat with one leg carelessly thrown over his saddle-horn, and in his hand he held a revolver that covered the heart of Kennedy.

It was a moment of awful suspense, and then the stern tones of Velvet Face were heard, and they reached the ears of those for whom they were intended with fearful distinctness:

"I pass here, sir!"

"There is a lady, and we are four; you but one," said Kennedy.

"It matters not; the lady I will see meets with no harm, but I pass here," was the smiling response.

"How in Satan's name will you do it?" angrily cried Kennedy.

"I will first kill you," was the provokingly cool retort, and, nerved into a spirit of utter recklessness by his awful danger, Kennedy replied in something of the same tone:

"Then there remains the lady to pass."

"That I will arrange."

"In Heaven's name! how?"

"But just now you asked a like query in the devil's name; you cannot serve two masters," was the provokingly cool reply, while the smile exceedingly fascinating in appearance, if it was not analyzed closely, never left the lips of Velvet Face.

"You are a fool, and I would be willing to try conclusions with you just here, were we on foot," angrily said Kennedy.

"But we are not on foot, sir, and it is well for you that we are not; now, sir, I say I pass," and the noble black cautiously moved a step nearer.

"Great God! will you hurl this lady off into eternity?"

"You are most careful of the lady, sir, seeing that three hours ago you captured her; but I will relieve you of all further trouble regarding her," and, glancing quickly upward, Velvet Face gave a loud call.

"Yes, the Red Dove hears," came back from over the edge of the cliff, which at that place was a hundred feet above them.

"Lower the lariats, Red Dove," was the order, and all waited in silence and awe, until a dark coil fell around Muriel, who nervously grasped it.

"Lady, be good enough to wrap that around your waist until you are secure—that is it! now grasp the lariats above your head and raise yourself from your saddle!"

Silently and with perfect coolness Muriel obeyed, and again came the order:

"Now urge your horse forward, and from under you."

There was a space of nearly two lengths between each of the descending horses, and at an earnest word from Muriel, Featherhoof slowly moved forward, and left her suspended in mid-air, when again the calm voice of Velvet Face was heard:

"Now lower yourself to the shelf, please, for the lariats are long enough."

In silence Muriel obeyed, and her feet touched the narrow shelf, while the lariat around her waist gave her a feeling of perfect security.

Eagerly Kennedy and his comrades had watched these maneuvers, the former striving to catch Velvet Face off his guard so as to draw a revolver, but to his chagrin, finding that he seemed to be watching the maiden's movements, and at the same time keeping his eye upon him.

"Now, sir, I pass here."

Seeing that the moment for instant action had come, Kennedy dropped his hand upon his pistol-butt; but with the act rung out a sharp report and with a bound the horse of the masked kidnapper went over the shelf, a bullet in his brain, and carrying his rider with him still seated in his saddle.

Yet, in that fearful moment, while the cry of horror at his fate was upon his lips, the man drew his revolver to attempt to avenge his own death, but the weapon fell from his shattered arm, and down into the abyss of eternity went steed and rider, to fall with a sickening crash upon the rocks below.

With horror at the scene, Muriel Merle covered her face with her hands, and felt herself reeling with weakness; but the lariat around her waist upheld and saved her, while Featherhoof, alarmed by the shot, had started so that one hoof slipped over the edge of the precipice, and for an instant his life hung by a thread, as it were; but a dextrous movement recovered

him his footing, just as Velvet Face again spoke:

"I am sorry, lady, to have you witness such a scene, but it is life and death between us," and again his revolver flashed, just as the arrow left the bow in Blue Snake's hand, and mingling with the echoes of the shot were two piercing shrieks, as two more steeds plunged to death with their riders, and Muriel again reeled as though about to swoon away, and once more was upheld by the lariats.

"Steady, Midnight, old fellow," she heard in the tones of Velvet Face, and a fascination she could not resist caused her to look at the remarkable man before her, and she beheld him slowly slipping back over the haunches of his noble steed, and light in safety upon the shelf.

With another word to Midnight, she beheld him creep beneath him and then rise before him and pat him gently, after which he approached Featherhoof, and she cried out anxiously to save her pet:

"Oh, sir, must poor Featherhoof meet the same fate as the others?"

"Not if he is careful, but it is a long and tedious backward trip he'll have of it; come, old fellow, back!"

At the words of Velvet Face the noble animal, though trembling violently, slowly obeyed, and made several steps in safety.

"He understands what is expected of him, and will come out all right, for a few steps will put him on the shelf where it is wider; now permit me to aid you," and skillfully passing Featherhoof, Velvet Face stepped to the side of Muriel, who said anxiously:

"But my poor horse, sir, needs more care than I do."

"Oh, Midnight will look after him, see! come, Midnight!"

Obediently to the call of his master the black steed moved cautiously forward, and as he advanced Featherhoof receded, with almost human sagacity, and seeing that her pet was safe, Muriel permitted Velvet Face to release her from the coils of the lariats, and support her up the path, most dangerous indeed even to a footman.

In front walked the Indian chief, while, naving drawn up the lariats, on the top of the cliff they saw Red Dove awaiting them, and at a snail-like pace behind came Midnight, forcing Featherhoof to retreat before him, forming a strange, thrilling scene, never to be forgotten by those who a few minutes before had witnessed the fearful tragedy and death-plunge from the Devil's Ladder.

CHAPTER VII.

PLAYING HIS TRUMP CARD.

WHEN Velvet Face heard the ringing cry of Muriel Merle for help, he had darted away like the wind, and after a rapid climb by a steep pathway, with which he seemed acquainted, he reached the spot where he had seen her seated upon her horse, and then seized by her captors.

Dismounting, he made a rapid survey of the ground, with the skill of a thorough border scout, and had come to some conclusion as to who the captors were, when suddenly before him, appeared the forms of the two Bannocks, both father and daughter, panting from the fatigue of their climb up the hillside.

"Hal! chief, you and your child must have wings to reach here so soon; but you are welcome, as there has been foul work done here," said Velvet Face, and the chief held forth his hand, and said impressively:

"Let the Blue Snake thank the great pale-face for he owes him his life, and the life of the Red Dove."

"Don't mention it, for you may return the compliment some day; now tell me if you know what these traces mean?" and, with a face that the peculiar smile had fled from, Velvet Face pointed to the tracks upon the sward.

"The Blue Snake sees the trail of the Danite serpent there."

"As I thought; poor girl, if she is in the power of those devils; she doubtless belongs to the train I have seen heading this way, and we must save her if in our power."

The chief and Red Dove both acquiesced in this resolve, and, after a short consultation Blue Snake, who knew every covert and path in the mountains, led the way until they came to where the Danites had turned from the path, to throw their pursuers off their scent.

But the masked leader had no idea that such trained trailers as Velvet Face and Blue Snake would be on his track, and failed to deceive him, and knowing just where they would again strike the main trail, and at once determined upon a course of action, which the Border Bravo hastily formed in his mind, and which with the aid of lariats procured from the Indian's retreat, which was fortunately near by, was most successfully carried out, as the reader has seen.

Having reached the plateau with Muriel, Velvet Face halted, and was joined by Blue Snake and Red Dove, whose sweet face quite won the heart of the city maiden, already drawn toward her by the part she had played in her rescue from the masked Danites.

But, until Featherhoof at last reached the plateau in safety, Muriel was nervous, and,

when she saw that her pet was safe she threw her arms around his neck in affectionate greeting, which the beautiful and faithful horse acknowledged with low whinnies of delight.

"Chief, you need feel no fear in coming to the camps, for I intend to live there for awhile, and wish you to come and see me, for I am the friend of yourself and Red Dove," said Velvet Face, as he prepared to start on the way back to the valley.

"And I too am your friend, and we shall meet again," and Muriel held forth her hand to Red Dove and then to Blue Snake, and turned to Velvet Face, who raised her to her saddle as lightly as though she had been a child.

"Now, lady, I will—"

"My name is Muriel—" she hesitated an instant, as she caught the dark, fascinating eyes of Velvet Face fixed upon her, and added in a low tone—"Merle."

"And I carry my name in my face, so men say, Miss Merle, as they call me Velvet Face, though my head is hard enough to make up for it," said the man, with a smile, as he threw himself across his saddle, and, with a parting wave of the hand to the Bannocks led the way back to the trail.

"But that is only your border name, sir, given by your friends?"

"I have no friends, Miss Merle," he said, sadly, and she saw that behind his light manner and smiling face lay a vein of sadness; but he added in the same light way as before:

"The nomenclature of the plains and mountains is something remarkable, Miss Merle, for every peculiarity of a person is seized upon by the self-appointed sponsors in baptism to designate one by; I too have another name, for I am called the Border Bravo," and his lip curled slightly, as though he did not feel honored by the appellation.

"After what I have seen of your deeds, Mr.—, Mr.—"

"My name is Velvet Face, Miss Merle," he said, politely, yet with that in his manner that gave her to understand that he cared not, for some reason, to be known by other than his frontier cognomen.

"Well, Mr. Velvet Face, I do not wonder that you have won the title of Bravo, if, as I understand it, it means a man who has no fear, and whom all men fear, as there is no deed too rash for him to attempt."

"I fear I do not prize it, as it was won in too many wild scenes such as one has to pass through on this border; but may I ask if you understand why the Danites kidnapped you?"

"The Danites?" cried Muriel, in alarm, as her face turned white.

"Yes, those were some of the Mormon Danite band; I thought you knew that."

"No, no; they came upon me unawares, for with Paradise Valley, the destination of our train in sight, I dreamt not of danger, and rode on ahead; oh! sir, from what have you not saved me?" and the beautiful eyes filled with tears, while Velvet Face said significantly:

"There is as much danger to be dreaded in Paradise Valley, notwithstanding its name, Miss Merle, as on the trail, and I fear you have come to a dangerous country to dwell."

"Alas! I fear so; but is it not strange that I have not been missed from the train by my father and friends, and—"

"Halt! Velvet Face, my beauty, I holds trump keards now, an' yer is my game."

The hoarse challenge, and words that followed, ended in a cruel, mocking laugh, and both the man and maiden drew rein, for over a boulder, not twenty feet away, peered the cruel, triumphant face of Carl of Colorado, and his rifle covered the heart of Velvet Face.

CHAPTER VIII.

MAD MYRA OF THE MOUNTAIN.

THOUGH taken by surprise, and at once realizing his danger, Velvet Face did not change color, for he had too often before looked death squarely in the face and escaped it, to despair, although he recognized in the one who held the rifle aimed at his heart Carl the Killer, the very man whom, a few hours before, he had conquered in the knife encounter.

Muriel Merle also recognized the man, for she had had a fair view of him from her perch on the cliff above, and she felt assured that he would now avenge himself upon his enemy.

A creature of sudden impulse, and utterly fearless, she immediately determined to save Velvet Face, and with a word to Featherhoof, the faithful animal bounded at once before Midnight, and the body of the maiden shielded the man from harm.

"Now draw your weapon, sir," she quickly cried.

But Velvet Face did not move a muscle, for he knew the man beyond the rock, and would not give him an excuse to risk a shot at him, through the body of the maiden; but he calmly said:

"Miss Merle, I thank you; but ride from between us, please, for he has the advantage, and let him do his will."

"You is a plucky one, pard, but yer pluck hain't a-goin' ter save yer, fer we don't want

no sich men as you be in these diggin's, so I intends ter kill yer."

"A barking dog seldom bites, Carl of Colorado," was the sneering reply of Velvet Face, and he again urged Muriel to ride from between them; but she was firm, and still shielded him as much as possible, while Captain Carl, knowing how well he had the advantage, was inclined to play with the man in his power, as a cat does with a mouse, and said in his hoarse voice, at the same time nodding his head to one side:

"A leetle more to ther right, gal, as ther photography man said ter me when I hed my pictur' tuk; a leetle more ter ther right with ther putty face o' yours, or I kin chip ther pretty cheek o' hisn right off; thar, thar's better; now look straight heur, Mister Velvet Face, right inter this leetle hole, an' I'll hev a nice pictur' of yer arter death, ter hand down ter posterity—thar, thar's it, smile sweet—now—"

"Carl the Killer, move one inch and you die!"

Terse and to the point came the words, just as Carl's finger was about to press the trigger, and neither of the three saw the speaker; but, with a muttered oath, Carl of Colorado glanced over his shoulder, and his cruel face turned livid, for he saw that he was in the same danger with which he threatened Velvet Face.

And, in the instant of that look, the position of affairs changed, for spurring his horse around the rock, followed by Muriel, Velvet Face dropped his revolver quickly at an aim upon the huge ruffian's head, and the tableau was reversed.

"Hands is up, pard! Don't shoot, I begs yer," almost shrieked Captain Carl, for he expected instant death at the hands of the man he had a moment before held in his power.

"Whining cur, I would not have your life upon my hands," and Velvet Face turned toward the one who had so opportunely turned the tide in his favor, and saw that it was a woman, and, with an exclamation of surprise, Muriel recognized her as the strangely beautiful creature who had warned her not to remain in Paradise Valley.

That Velvet Face had never seen the strange woman before was evident, for he seemed surprised at her wild attire and presence in that desolate spot; but he said in his pleasant way:

"I owe you thanks for my life, young lady; but may I know who it is that I am to remember for a favor so great?"

"That man knows me; let him tell," was the quiet reply, as she now, for the first time since she had changed the situation of affairs, lowered her pistol, that had covered Carl of Colorado.

"Yas, I does know yer, gal, an' I isn't ther only one as is afeard o' yer, fer yer is Satan on wheels, as we knows down in ther valley."

"And my name?" she asked, sadly, as if wishing him to speak it.

"They calls yer Mad Myra o' ther Mountain, an' I has heerd them call yer ther Hermit Huntress; but whatever is yer handle I wishes ter steer clear o' one who they say has dealin's with the devil," and the man seemed awed by his superstitious belief regarding the strange woman.

"Just now I have dealings with the devil, Carl the Killer, and not liking his company I order you to go—that is, if this gentleman does not wish to kill you, as you would him, had I not been on your track, and believing you meant deviltry, followed you."

"I guesses he hain't ther man ter kick a dog when he's down," whined Carl of Colorado, looking slyly up at Velvet Face, who answered contemptuously:

"I raise my hand only against those who have the courage to meet me, not to cringing curs; leave your arms there, sir, and when we are gone come back after them."

Carl the Killer quickly obeyed the injunction, and slunk out of sight in the nearest pine thicket, to await the departure of those whom he now had just cause to dread.

"Will you accept a seat behind my saddle, miss, and go to the settlement with us?" asked Velvet Face, when he had watched the ruffian out of sight, and he turned to the strange child-woman before him, for she seemed scarcely over twenty, and was very beautiful, though it was a wild, weird beauty in keeping with the life she led, and which had gained for her the name of Mad Myra of the Mountain, for, though she often appeared in the settlements, it was only to purchase food, which she carried to her secret retreat in the hills, and which no person had yet been able to find.

Who she was none knew, and nothing was known of her, other than that a year before she had appeared at the settlement and claimed a mine, showing evidence that it had been staked out and worked before the miners had come to that part of the country.

The miner, a cross-grained, idle fellow, had contested her right, and she had challenged him to fight her for it, and he had consented, to escape the jeers of his comrades.

All Purgatory had assembled to see the duel, which was with revolvers at fifteen paces, to draw, and fire at the word.

And all Purgatory saw Hayes, the miner, fall dead in his tracks, a bullet in his forehead, while Mad Myra had coolly walked away, and from that day been allowed full right to her mine.

That she had been in the valley before any one had emigrated there was certain, and that she preferred to range the mountains hunting to working her mine, was also the truth, and this was all that was known of the strange creature, whom both Velvet Face and Muriel gazed upon with such deep interest.

In answer to the invitation of Velvet Face to ride behind him, she turned her gaze full upon him, and said, in her rich tones:

"I thank you, but I care not to go to the valley, as I have a home in these mountains; you heard my name, Mad Myra of the Mountain?"

"Yes, and have heard of you before, from train-men and guides; but you are not mad," said Velvet Face, kindly.

"If having sworn an oath to accomplish one deed in life, and not to die until I have done so, but then to end my existence by my own hand, be madness, then I am mad."

"If, to live away from my fellow-men and women, to roam these wild haunts alone, to avoid bloodshed, but to kill when I have to, be madness, then I am mad."

She spoke with an impressiveness of voice and gesture that caused pity to well up in the hearts of those who heard her, and Muriel answered:

"I wish I could win you away from your wild life, and have you come to me."

"Ah, me! that can never be; duty calls me here; but I warned you, lady, not to cast your lot in life in this far-away land, and you heeded not my warning, and already has danger overtaken you, for I know that the Danites had you in their power."

"You know this?" asked Muriel, with a slight suspicion in her tone.

"Yes, for I met their leader, Jean Leo, and he told me that he had snatched a brand from the burning, and had sent a fair Gentile to Salt Lake City."

"Ah, you know him, then?"

"Yes, as Jean Leo, the chief of the Danite League; I meet him often in my wanderings; but the shadows of night come on, and your train is by this time in the valley, and I must leave you, but once more beg you to heed my warning."

"Alas! I cannot."

"One question! do you know Jean Leo?"

"I do not."

"Then I will be your friend, and we shall meet again; farewell," and, with a wave of her hand, Mad Myra strode away, while Velvet Face and Muriel Merle rode on down to the valley, both of them deeply impressed with the weird creature whom they had so strangely met.

CHAPTER IX.

ON THE TRAIL.

To say that Paradise Valley was excited is no name for it, when Ralph Reno, the guide of the emigrant-train, rode into the settlement, and informed the people that their population was to be increased a hundred souls, and that there were a number of fine families in the coming settlers.

Once before Ralph Reno had guided a party to Paradise Valley, but they were mostly men to work in the mines, and not such as would become settlers there after they had dug out of the generous earth all the rich ore it would yield them.

The excitement in the canyon, where a trial had been ordered for punishing the guilty ones in the settlement, had caused those not joining in the Vigilante meeting to "strike work," and hence a fair-sized crowd had quickly assembled to greet the coming train, which was augmented considerably as the band of law-makers broke up, after the hanging of the two miners brought in by Velvet Face.

As the sun cast long shadows across the valley fully three hundred people had assembled upon the banks of the river, which the Guide had selected as the encampment of the train, and the Vigilantes having come in from the canyon all were excitedly discussing the strange maiden seen on the cliff, and who had been so mysteriously captured, while it was the opinion of every one who had seen the strange character known as Velvet Face, in his knife-duel with Captain Carl, that he would retake her from her captors.

Who she was none knew, as the Guide had returned to the mountain to hurry the train into camp before dark; but that she belonged to the coming outfit none doubted.

After a long and impatient waiting a cheer broke from the crowd, as out of the cove of pines at the mountain base suddenly appeared a wagon, followed immediately by another and another, until in a few minutes a long line of "prairie-schooners" were heading toward the camping-ground.

At the head of the train rode Ralph Reno, the Guide, and by his side was Malcolm Merle,

whom the reader had last seen in his sumptuous New York home.

Presently past each wagon dashed a lady on horseback, and the settlers saw her halt by the two horsemen, to whom she seemed to communicate something in an excited tone.

Instantly they came to a standstill, and the three wheeling suddenly started back in a rapid gallop.

Stopping by the first wagon, the Guide pointed out the camping-ground to the teamster and then continued rapidly on, until the three disappeared from sight in the pine thicket.

But here they halted not, and up the steep mountain road they urged their horses, a look of anxiety upon each face.

By each wagon they passed were groups of emigrants mounted and afoot, and their eyes searching keenly the while, until at last they swept by the tail of the train, the cattle and led horses, and came to a halt, for the herdsmen had told them that no one was loitering in the road.

"Great God! my child! my child! where can she be?" cried Mr. Merle, in alarm, while the Guide said, nervously:

"We certainly have not passed her on the way."

"No, that was impossible; what can have happened her?"

"I hope nothing, uncle; when I last saw Muriel, we rode up to her, as she sat on her horse gazing down into the valley."

"Where was that, Camille?" and Mr. Merle turned eagerly to his niece, a bright-faced, fairy-formed maiden of seventeen, with eyes of dark blue, and hair that rivaled the rays of the sun—one of those joy-hearted maidens who win hearts of both men and women at the first glance.

"It was on the cliff, uncle, where we obtained the first view of the valley. Mu seemed *distracted* about something, and rode on ahead, I thought to join Mr. Reno, who I know so likes to show her the beautiful scenery," and Camille Conrad cast an arch glance at the handsome young Guide, whose face colored, while he said quickly:

"She did not overtake me, Miss Conrad, so cannot of course be in the valley; Mr. Merle, I should advise that you ride on to the settlement, and if you do not find Miss Merle, organize at once a search party to come to the mountains, while I will remain here and leave no nook or canyon unlooked into."

"I will do as you suggest, Mr. Reno; come, Camille, and God grant we find my poor child," and now thoroughly alarmed Mr. Merle and his niece rode rapidly away, leaving the Guide seated upon his horse, and meditating deeply.

"Great God! I dare not give vent to the thought that Jean Leo's Danites may have kidnapped her; but the accursed devils have before this taken young girls from trains, and carried them to their city as wives for their Prophets, and what they have done they will do again."

For a few moments the Guide seemed dazed by the thoughts that oppressed him; but after a while he cast off his moody manner, and rousing himself to busy action, began his search with energy, for, in the long march from the East, he had learned to devotedly love the beautiful girl, who had ever treated him so kindly.

A man of fine appearance, winning address, and a gentleman by education and birth, adversity had driven him to the border, where he soon became a noted plainsman, and western-bound wagon-trains were always anxious to secure his services.

Recognizing in the family of Mr. Merle people far above the condition in life that generally sought homes on the frontier, unless driven thither by poverty or the committing of crime, Ralph Reno had naturally attached himself more familiarly to their party, and from the day they pulled out of their first camp, had devotedly, though silently, loved Muriel Merle, while she had admired his bravery and skill, and was pleased by his manly nature and refinement, and often rode for hours with him in advance of the train, in contrast to her pretty cousin, Camille Conrad, who one day was scouring the prairie with the herders, another driving a team, again associating with the children of the emigrants, or going off with her uncle and the hunters to kill game.

With his love increasing each day of the long march, and the hope in his heart that Muriel would return that love, it was no wonder, then, that Ralph Reno was nearly crazed with the dread that some dire harm had befallen the maiden.

Rapidly he wended his way back to the spot where Camille had said she had last seen her cousin, and knowing the hoof-track of her horse, from some peculiarity he had before noted, he observed that she had gone in down the mountain toward the valley.

"There is another place she would likely ride to, that she might have a view of the valley," he muttered, and he spurred out to the point where the cliff overhung the canyon, and, to his delight beheld the tracks of Featherhoof.

But the instant after his face clouded, for he

saw two swinging forms beneath him, and felt that doubtless she had witnessed a tragic scene beneath her, that had given her cause to fear life in the mining region.

Then Ralph Reno's face became still more clouded, as he beheld other hoof-tracks on that mountain spur, and following them crossed the wagon-road and disappeared in the thickets beyond.

Now and then he saw the well-known tracks of Featherhoof among others, which his craft told him belonged not to any of the horses in the train, and at last he came to a halt and said in smothered tones:

"Curses on you, Jean Leo, you have her in your vile power."

After a moment's thought he determined to return and meet the party, which Mr. Merle had organized for a search, and then continue on in pursuit, for to go alone he knew would be madness.

As he sadly turned backward he started; for there came to his ears the sound of approaching hoofs, and quickly he sought shelter behind a huge boulder.

A moment after two persons rode in sight, and a cry broke from the lips of the Guide, and he said joyously:

"Saved! thank God! and, as I live and breathe, that is Velvet Face, the Border Bravo."

"But why is he here, and what has happened, I wonder?"

"Well, I shall soon know," and he rode out from his hiding-place, to be instantly covered by the revolver of Velvet Face, whose movement was as quick as lightning.

"Hold on, pard, don't shoot an old friend," cried the Guide.

"Not for the world, Reno; but I was caught napping awhile since, and am on my guard now; but I am glad to see you and learn from Miss Merle that you are the guide of her train," and Velvet Face and Ralph Reno clasped hands warmly, while the latter said:

"Yes, and I am glad to find the truant, about whom we were all so anxious; may I ask, Miss Merle, how you escaped from Jean Leo's Danites?"

"Ah! how knew you I had been their prisoner, Mr. Reno?" asked Muriel, with a smile.

"We of the border read signs, Miss Merle, as Velvet Face will tell you, that seldom lead us astray, and I saw where they had kidnapped you, and had followed your trail thus far; but I need not ask who rescued you, when I see whom you are with."

"True, a band of masked men whom I know now are Danites, did seize me, and to this gentleman I owe my rescue from a fate to which death would be preferable; but does my father know of my absence?"

"Oh, yes, and has gone on to the valley to organize a search-party."

"Then let us ride on rapidly and relieve his mind regarding me," said Muriel, and with a cavalier upon each side of her she dashed on, and reached the valley just as the shadows of night fell upon it, though a glance upward showed that the mountain-tops were yet bathed in the golden light left by the sun.

"There comes the rescue-party," said Ralph Reno, as he saw a band of horsemen approaching, and the next moment she was affectionately welcomed by her father, while the band of two-score mounted men, after a cheer of joy at her safety, bent their gaze upon the man at her side, whose advent into their midst had already been fraught with so much good.

In a few words Muriel told what had happened, as they rode to the emigrant camps, where the fires were burning brightly, and that night the denizens of Paradise Valley were discussing until a late hour the exciting scenes of the day, and the arrival of the new emigrants.

But there was one whose heart was heavy, for another than himself had rescued Muriel Merle from peril, and that other was one who would prove a most dangerous rival, thought Ralph Reno, as he lay on his blanket near the camp-fire, for slumber refused to close his eyelids and banish by bright dreams his bitter thoughts against Velvet Face, who lay wrapped in his *serape* not ten feet from him, and as motionless and silent as the dead.

CHAPTER X.

RALPH RENO'S OATH.

ERE a month had gone by in Paradise Valley quite a change had come upon the scene, for the new emigrants were not idlers, and half a score of rude, but comfortable houses had been built, and one of more than ordinary pretensions had been erected upon the river-bank, not far from the mouth of the canyon where the six "fur-reners" had so nearly been hanged for not being natives, the Vigilantes having forgotten that two of them, the Indians, held a prior claim to the title of Americans to themselves; but then mobs never stop to reason when swayed by passions.

It was a charming spot for a house, looking up the valley to the far-away mountains beyond, within a stone's throw of the crystal stream that drained the vale, and beneath the towering crags of the lesser range of hills, while

the mining camps and Purgatory City could also be seen not very far distant.

An emigrant who has pretty women in his home never fails to find plenty of willing hands to aid him in building his house, and thus it was that the lovely faces of Muriel and Camille drew to the assistance of Mr. Merle all the young miners from the camps, and the idlers from Purgatory City, anxious to lend a hand to the old gentleman to curry favor with the young ladies.

The consequences were that Sunset Retreat, as Mr. Merle called his home, glided into shape most rapidly, and was the cabin of the settlement, and, under the taste and skill of its fair occupants, was a most comfortable and cosy home, far surpassing anything seen in that wild region before.

Why Mr. Merle had come West the Purgatorians soon discovered, as he held the title to a mine purchased some time before from one of his depositors for a mere song, and which, when adversity had overtaken him, he had been forced to rely upon for a support.

Some told him that the mine had never panned out well, while others said that there was some mystery regarding it, as the former owner, the man from whom Mr. Merle had purchased it, had left Paradise Valley a poor man, it was supposed, and yet, after having suddenly disappeared, he had been seen in Chicago, by miners visiting home, rolling in wealth, not a year after his departure.

And more, some few days after his leaving, a party of miners had looked in at the mine and discovered two dead bodies, that no one there remembered having seen in life, and who had knife-thrusts in their hearts to show the cause of their death.

Since then Dead Man's Mine had been avoided by the dwellers in the valley, that name clinging to it, instead of Gold Canyon Pocket, as it had previously been called.

Mr. Merle was determined, however, to make what he could out of his bargain, all that remained to him, and shortly after his arrival in the valley appeared in the dress of a miner, and with several others he had hired wended his way each morning to his mine and began work, while Muriel and Camille spent their days in housekeeping, beautifying their homes, and in gallops along the paths and trails near the settlement, and at night entertained their visitors, among whom were Dick Hazel and Guy Godfrey, the school-teacher, whose duties had been greatly added to by the arrival of the train, which had brought a number of children along.

As if determined also to settle in the valley, Ralph Reno had built him a small cabin on the mountain-side, and was daily prospecting for a rich find, for, could he strike a lead that would pan out well, he would offer himself to Muriel Merle, and at once take her from the scenes where she seemed so thoroughly out of place.

Though he looked upon Velvet Face as his rival, for he was not blind to his fascinations, and the fact that Muriel admired him greatly, he had invited him to share his humble home with him, and the invitation had been accepted, though the Border Bravo had slept there but one night, and eaten but one meal with his host, as he was constantly on the go, being absent for days at a time, and gone no one knew whither, and none dared ask, for there was that about the strange man, in spite of his light, pleasant manner, that forbade intruding upon his personal affairs.

Why he had come to Paradise Valley none knew, and the only one to whom he had been personally known before his coming was Ralph Reno, and he had very little to say regarding him, until one evening, when a party of seven were gathered around the hospitable supper-table of Malcolm Merle.

Those seven consisted of, besides the host and the two maidens, Ralph Reno, Dick Hazel, Guy Godfrey and a slender-formed, handsome, but sad-faced youth of about nineteen, a waif that had strolled into Purgatory City one day, coming from no one knew where, and having nothing to say for himself, other than that he had come to the mines to dig a fortune.

Though ever obliging and harmless, from some reason he had not been fancied by the miners, and having noticed his lonely condition, and been touched by his sad face, both Muriel and Camille had urged Mr. Merle to take him into his employ, and, though he was not able to work hard, Oil, the Waif, as he was called, toiled in Dead Man's Mine every day, and Sunday nights came to Sunset Retreat to supper, a break in his life which he seemed greatly to enjoy.

Guy Godfrey, the teacher, Dick Hazel, the miner, and Ralph Reno were also among these favored Sunday supper guests, and it was not to hear the ex-banker's conversation upon the financial condition of the country, and the possibilities of the "Great West" that brought them there, either, but rather the bright eyes of Camille, as far as Dick and Guy were concerned, and Muriel, the reader already knows, had won the heart of the Guide.

They were jolly suppers, these in that far-away cabin, for Washee Washee, the Chinese

whose neck Velvet Face had saved from stretching, had been employed in the household, and under the teaching of the two maidens was developing into a superior "Melican cookee man," as he expressed it, and cooked to a turn the delicious game with which Blue Snake the Bannock chief kept the table supplied.

Black Brick, Yacob Holstein and Murphy Maginnis, the three others who had so nearly met death at the hands of the Vigilantes, being the ones hired by Mr. Merle to aid him in working his mine, it will be surmised that the ex-banker had become quite an important personage in Paradise Valley, which was by no means lessened by the beauty of his daughter and niece.

Just as the party had sat down to their Sunday supper, to sample Washee Washee's culinary skill, that important personage skipped into the room, and said with a grin:

"Goodee Melican manee comee," and he turned his eyes upon Muriel, as though the information was for her particular ears.

"Who is it, Washee?" asked the maiden.

"Goodee Melican manee; savee Washee Washee from hangee."

"Ah! he means Velvet Face," said Mr. Merle, and Ralph Reno's quick eyes saw the color rise in Muriel's face at the name.

"Yessie, Vellee Facee, goodee Melican manee."

"Ask him to come right in, and then bring another plate and chair," said Mr. Merle, just as the person spoken of entered the door, and said pleasantly:

"Good-evening, ladies, and you, gentlemen."

General salutations were exchanged, and taking the seat assigned him at the table, Velvet Face went on to tell them of a discovery he had accidentally made of a rich lead of gold, and he took some specimens from his pocket, and all pronounced them most valuable.

"I found it by accident up in the mountains, and have staked out my find, and it will yield largely I am certain."

After supper Velvet Face said he desired to see some one in the camps, and turning to the Guide he added:

"Reno, I'll claim your hospitality to-night, for I want you as a partner in my mine, and we'll go there to-morrow, as I have then to leave for a week."

And to go where? Could a man go to any place in that country for a week, and what could call him away? were the thoughts in Muriel's mind, after Velvet Face had gone, and observing her *distract* manner, Ralph Reno turned and said:

"Miss Muriel, will you not sing for us to-night?"

"After awhile I will; but tell me, Mr. Reno, where did you know that man before?"

"What man, may I ask, Miss Merle?" was the answer, though Ralph Reno well knew to whom the maiden referred.

"Velvet Face, for I know him only by that name."

"And no one else knows him by any other, for his life is a mystery."

"Tell me what you do know of him."

A cloud came over Ralph Reno's face, but he replied:

"I have met him at several of the forts on the plains, and he has won a name as being the bravest of the brave, a dead shot, and though never seeking an encounter, he never avoids one, and many a man has fallen before his deadly aim."

"Some say he roams about to avenge some wrong done him in the past, and it may be, for that smile he wears is a mask to hide deeper feelings, I am confident; what brought him here I know not, but thank God he came, for—" and Ralph Reno glanced around to see that Mr. Merle had left the room, and Camille was entertaining the others out on the piazza, and he continued earnestly:

"For he saved you from worse than death, Muriel, and I love him for it, for I love you with all my heart, and have built up the fond hope that one day you would return that love and make me happy."

Muriel started at the man's earnest words; but she looked him squarely in the face, while she laid her little hand upon his arm, and said:

"Mr. Reno, I am sorry you have spoken thus, for I do not love you, though I admire and like you ever so much."

"Come, let us be friends, for we can never be more."

"Never is a hard word, and a sad one; tell me, Muriel, that if I can dig a fortune out of the ground, you will one day be my wife, and once more you can live, as you deserve, amid civilized scenes, instead of here in these wilds."

"I like it here," she answered, moodily.

"Then you shall remain here, only promise—"

"No, no, I cannot, I will not promise."

"Muriel Merle, I know why you will not promise, why you have cast me aside—you love Velvet Face, that man who dare not make known his own name," and the man trembled with suppressed passion, for jealous rage had taken possession of him.

"Mr. Reno, you forget to whom you are speaking, sir," and Muriel arose haughtily.

"So be it, I will leave you, but you shall never marry that man; I swear it!"

The next instant he was gone, and trembling with emotion Muriel sunk back in her chair, and hid her face in her hands, to start suddenly some time after as a shot was heard without.

Ere she could reach the door Washee Washee darted in, crying out:

"Missee, missee, goodee Melican manee shootee; he comee heree, he ridee longee, and manee shootee hee."

"A man shot him, you say?" asked Muriel, with awful calmness of manner.

"Yessie, missee; shootee with gunnee; goodee Melican manee no falllee off, only so, and horsee runnee way withee hee," and Washee leaned across the back of the chair to more fully explain his words of how Velvet Face had fallen on the neck of his horse at the shot.

"Then the shot wounded him, if it did not kill him; here, Washee, tell me, did you see the one who shot him?" and she grasped the Chinaman by the arm.

"Yessie; me t'inkie he wasee Ralphhee."

"Oh, God!" and Muriel sunk back in her chair, just as Camille and Oil the Waif entered the room, both of them very pale, and the former cried:

"Muriel, some one fired upon Velvet Face from an ambush just now, and a miner has just come and reported that Midnight flew by him up the road, with his master hanging over on his neck, as though severely wounded, or dead."

"So soon, so soon, Ralph Reno has kept his oath," murmured Muriel, dazedly, and with a sudden cry she fell upon the floor in a swoon.

CHAPTER XI.

WHO WAS THE ASSASSIN?

WHEN Muriel Merle recovered consciousness, after her swoon in the sitting-room of the cabin, at the words of Camille Conrad, she found her cousin bending anxiously over her, and instantly the thought that she had betrayed herself caused her to bring her powers of self-control into play, for, as the reader knows, she possessed remarkable nerve, and opening her eyes she said, in a fatigued sort of way:

"What is the matter, Camille?"

"You fainted, that is all, cousin mine," was the response.

"Ah yes, I remember; somebody was shot, I believe?"

"Yes, that is Velvet Face was shot at, and it is supposed was wounded badly, or killed."

"Can no one find out which?" asked Muriel, rising to a sitting posture.

"Uncle, with Mr. Godfrey and Dick Hazel, have gone up the valley in the direction taken by the horse of Velvet Face."

"Then they did not know that I fainted, Camille?" asked Muriel, quickly.

"No, I closed the door, and only Washee and Oil know it; but I told them to hold their tongues about it, and they will; Oil has gone to camp, but the Chinese is most anxious about you, and is sitting out on the doorstep now."

"That heathen has more heart than most Christians, Camille; but it was thoughtful of you, dear, to shield me, for they would have thought me so foolish to faint just at the news that a man had been shot," and Muriel rose to her feet and approached the window, while Camille smiled, for, woman-like, she penetrated the mask her cousin had put on.

"Come out into the air, cousin mine, and you will feel better," and opening the door leading out upon the piazza, she continued:

"Here is Washee now."

"Yes, Washee waites see if missee allee yitee."

"Yes, Washee, I am better now, and I hope you won't speak of my being ill," said Muriel, kindly.

The Chinaman rolled his eyes upward, gave a grin, and then his face assumed that "child-like and bland" expression so well depicted by Bret Harte, and replied:

"Washee allee yitee; talkee littee, talkee sense, talkee muchee, talkee muchee fool."

"You are a good fellow, Washee."

"Tankee, me goodee allee samee likee Melican man damn rascal," was the ingenious reply, and even Muriel laughed at the heathen's quaint manner and expression in extolling his virtues.

"Melican manee comee," suddenly cried Washee, and all heard the clatter of hoofs approaching, and a few moments after Mr. Merle dashed up to the door and alighted.

"Well, father, what does it all mean?" asked Muriel, with forced composure.

"It means, my child, that there has been a foul deed done, and Velvet Face is the victim."

"Is he dead?" asked Muriel, in the same constrained voice.

"No one knows; it seems he was returning here, doubtless to get Reno to go on to his cabin with him in the mountains, and a miner says he saw him draw rein and talk to a man over in the trail, and that high words passed between them—"

"Well, father?"

"Then the miner, who passed on up the river trail, says he looked back and saw in the moonlight Velvet Face ride on, and the one he had been talking to, suddenly raise his arm, and a flash and report followed.

"Instantly the miner, whose name is Kansas Kit, ran to the spot, but the man who fired the shot had disappeared, and he heard the rapid clatter of Velvet Face's horse dashing up the mountain trail.

"We, that is Hazel, Godfrey and myself, went on up the valley, the river and the mountain trails for some distance, and saw those who beheld Midnight dash by them like the wind, his master lying limp and motionless upon his neck, and held on, apparently, only by his rifle strap catching over the horn of his Mexican saddle."

"And you could not overtake the horse, father?"

"No, for he flies, rather than runs, and frightened, as he must be, there is no telling where he will stop."

"And this miner, uncle, Kansas Kit, did he not recognize the one who fired the shot?" asked Camille, quietly.

"He said it looked like Ralph Reno, but I told him the Guide was in my house at the time, and that he it could not be; but where is Reno?"

"He has gone, father."

"Doubtless to search for Velvet Face, for they seemed great friends; I trust he can bring us some news of that splendid man."

"I hope so too, father; but it is late, so let us retire," and Muriel led the way into the house, and she and Camille were soon in their cosy room, but to neither would slumber come, and every sound without caused them to start and listen, for they hoped that Hazel or Godfrey would return with news of Velvet Face."

At length just before dawn they dropped to sleep, but awoke with a start, as loud voices were heard without.

The sun was shining brightly, and outside on horseback, were several men, and one of them was speaking, and they recognized the voice of the school-teacher.

"We tracked Midnight, as soon as it was dawn, Mr. Merle, to what is known as the Devil's Ladder, and his trail led down it, and Hazel has ridden round the mountain to see where it goes after reaching the valley, while I returned to open my school."

"It cannot be possible that the horse, unurged, went down that place," said Mr. Merle.

"It is possible, sir, knowing the horse Velvet Face rode; you remember he came up it alone, and drove Featherhoof before him; but we will know by noon."

"And if no tracks are found at the valley end of the Devil's Ladder—"

"Then horse and rider went over upon the rocks, or into the river, which, at one place, runs beneath against the cliff; please thank Miss Merle for her horse, which you loaned me, and tell her that no human power could get Featherhoof down the Devil's Ladder again."

"Stay and breakfast with us, for the girls will soon be up."

"No, thank you, Mr. Merle; my regards to the ladies, please," and dismounting from Featherhoof and giving him in charge of Washee, Guy Godfrey walked toward his cabin, near Purgatory City, followed by those who had returned with him from the hunt for Velvet Face.

And all that day men returned from the search with no tidings of the horse and rider, and at sunset, tired out, and sad-faced, Dick Hazel put in an appearance at Sunset Retreat, and in answer to the eager inquiries of Mr. Merle, said:

"Waal, Mr. Merle, I have no good news, for there are no tracks leading from the Ladder to the valley."

"I went up the Ladder, leading my horse, for that isn't a place where I like to ride, and at one place it looked as though a horse had gone over."

"Was it not where I met with my adventure, Mr. Hazel?" asked Muriel, calmly, though her face was full of eager hope.

"No, miss, if I understand aright, that you met your mishap at the narrowest part o' ther Ladder; this were whar it overhangs ther river, and if he went down there, the torrent has carried him out o' sight ferever, 'ceptin' to ther angels o' God, Miss Mu'el."

The manner of Dick Hazel was impressive, and Muriel made no reply, but sat like a statue, while the miner went on:

"Thar are plenty in ther valley as we could spare, and it seems a shame that such a man should go, for though I am not given ter praisin' people, Mr. Merle, I will say that Velvet Face were one whose equal I never met."

"And who was his assassin, Mr. Hazel?" asked Muriel, calmly.

"That, nobody can sw'ar to, though Kansas Kit says it was Ralph Reno."

"But Reno was here, Dick," said Mr. Merle.

"No, sir, he left some leetle time afore the shot were fired."

"Why do you not seek Mr. Reno, and tell him what this Kansas Kit says?" asked Muriel, calmly.

"Kansas Kit went himself, Miss Muriel, to the cabin o' the guide miner, an' he wasn't there; his horse was gone, an' the fire look'd as tho' it hadn't been built up all night: you see, when Velvet Face left here after supper he went up to ther camps, an' he talked to some o' ther boys about his gold find, an' then his bein' shot so soon after, it looks very dismal for somebody, and ef we kin get wind o' who he is, thar will be tree-fruit hanging in Death Canyon."

All present understood the fearful meaning of "tree-fruit," and, rising quickly, Muriel sought her room, followed by the pitying eyes of Camille Conrad, who had read the fact that her cousin held a secret buried in her heart.

CHAPTER XII.

OLL, THE WAIF, CHIPS IN.

A WEEK passed away, and still the talk of the Paradise Valley settlers was the mysterious shooting of Velvet Face, and the still more remarkable disappearance of horse and rider after the firing of the shot.

It was believed, after Dick Hazel's explanation, that Midnight, in his fright at having his dead master on his back, had attempted to go down the Devil's Ladder, and a misstep had hurled him into the torrent hundreds of feet below, and miners had gone down the stream to the shoals, fifteen leagues from the valley to search for the bodies, but had returned unsuccessful.

Another remarkable circumstance, and which slowly drew suspicion upon him, after what Kansas Kit had said, was the disappearance of Ralph Reno, upon the very night that the mysterious shot had been fired.

The cabin in the mountain still remained deserted, and every search through the mountains for Ralph Reno had proved fruitless of results, and dark whispers were heard upon every side, and several of the main movers among the Vigilante band had questioned Muriel, and all at the cabin that night about the time of the Guide's departure.

In a straightforward way Muriel had told of the departure of the Guide, but had said nothing in regard to the love-scene between them, and the threat of Ralph Reno, while Washee also kept silent upon several little points where his testimony might have thrown light, if the crimination of the accused man was the object sought.

But the Vigilantes worked quietly to discover the murderer, for all that had seen Velvet Face admired and respected the brilliant man who had flashed like a meteor in their midst and then gone out like a candle in a night, and secret threats were made against whoever had sent him to his death, for that he lived not one would believe.

And thus two weeks rolled around, and once more a party had assembled around the hospitable board of Mr. Merle.

But two who had partaken of the supper that Sunday night a fortnight before, were absent.

Those two were Velvet Face, mourned for as among the dead, and Ralph Reno, who was now looked upon with dark suspicion as his murderer.

Presently Washee Washee, who was entering from the outside kitchen, with a dish of hot venison stew, suddenly gave a howl of fright, and springing forward emptied the contents of the platter upon the broad shoulders of Dick Hazel, who arose with blood in his eye against the Chinese, shouting in thunder tones:

"Yer yaller nigger o' Heathentown, you hev skint me from my neck to my heels with thet red-hot grub."

Restraining her laughter, Camille sprung to his aid with a napkin, and Mr. Merle began an apology to the miner, and rebuke to Washee Washee in the same breath, when the latter, who had retreated behind Muriel's chair, shouted:

"Melican manee comee!"

As he spoke, he pointed toward the open door, and in stepped Ralph Reno, pale, haggard-looking, and apparently surprised at the excitement his coming had caused.

"Toughtee killee Washee, too," muttered the Chinese, while the Guide, looking first at Mr. Merle and then at Muriel, said in his deep tones:

"My coming seems to cause surprise, and my presence to be unwelcome."

"We are surprised, Mr. Reno, for we thought you had fled from the country; come in, sir," said Mr. Merle, arising.

"I fled from the country, sir? I do not understand why you should say so; but I will not, by my presence, disturb so pleasant a party, so will retire."

"Hold on, pard! I has the drop square on yer heart, an' I'll send my bullit through it ef yer move," and springing to his feet, Dick Hazel leveled his revolver across the table, the act causing every one to quickly arise, and glance at the two men.

"Dick Hazel, have you gone mad?" asked Ralph Reno, sternly.

"No, but I is determined not ter let you escape."

"Why should I wish to escape, and for what?"

"Don't play us for softies, pard; we have been s'archin' fer you ther past two weeks, an' ef yer attempts to levant now, I'll jist save the Vigilantes trouble."

"Great God! what means this? Speak! I implore you, and tell me of what I am accused," and with pallid face and trembling form, Ralph Reno, regardless of Hazel's pistol, strode into the room and turned his gaze upon each face, while he stretched forth his arms with a gesture that was most pleading.

"You are looked upon, Ralph Reno, as the one who shot Velvet Face, two weeks ago to-night," said Guy Godfrey, stepping toward him.

"Shot Velvet Face? Good God! is that man dead?" asked the Guide, in tones of intense feeling.

"You heard my words; he was shot on the river trail, not a hundred paces from this cabin, and not a quarter of an hour after you left it, and there was one who says he saw you talking to Velvet Face, and that both of you seemed angry," said Godfrey.

"It is false; false as hell itself; I never saw Velvet Face after he left this house, and from here I went to my cabin in the mountains."

"Can you prove that, pard?" asked Dick Hazel.

"Only by my word, for I saw no one."

"Where have you been since then?" asked Mr. Merle, inclined by the honest manner of the accused to believe his words.

"I have been prospecting in the mountains, and with great luck, for I have struck a most valuable lead; see, here are specimens of the gold, and I have already named it the Hope mine," and he glanced at Muriel significantly, and drew from his pocket a handful of ore of the richest kind.

"You don't look happy, pard, like one who has struck it rich, for yer face is haggard like, and—"

"I have been ill, and my horse fell with me and hurt me."

"Hope you kin prove it, pard Reno; but it looks dark for you jist now, and I considers it my duty to take yer in charge."

"Never, sir!" and with a lightning movement Ralph Reno had drawn a weapon in each hand, one covering Dick Hazel, the other Guy Godfrey, who had both been caught off guard.

"Mr. Reno, I've got you covered, so you may as well surrender."

It was Oll the Waif who spoke, and he had suddenly glided from his place in the corner, to the back of Ralph Reno, and pressed his revolver against his head.

Like a hunted stag at bay, the Guide cast a look around him, and then his eyes fell upon Muriel and he seemed to change his mind, as to the carrying out of some act he had suddenly formed, for he lowered his weapons, and said, dejectedly:

"Here are my revolvers, Hazel; take them, for I surrender."

"Give 'em to ther boy, pard, for he is your captor, as you had me and my pard foul; take 'em, Oll."

"No, sir. I did not wish Mr. Reno to escape, if he is guilty of killing Velvet Face," modestly replied the youth.

"Waal, you did the biz, an' chipped in lively like, and saved me an' Teacher here, for he hed it in his eye ter pull on us."

"Come, pard, you must go up the valley with me, and the Vigilantes will give yer a fair trial; but your having found a rich lead, just after Velvet found one, and he being dead, it seems to me as ef yer better hunt 'way back in yer mem'ry chest for some leetle prayer ter say, for yer know what ther lads be when they gets on a blood-scent."

"Yes, I know them well; so be it, I am your prisoner, and I will face my accusers, and face the result."

He laid his belt of weapons upon the table, and, folding his arms, bowed his head in submission to his fate.

CHAPTER XIII.

THE VIGILANTES HOLD COURT.

MONDAY morning, following the return of Ralph Reno, broke bright and beautiful, but the settlement seemed more like a Sabbath in appearance, as the miners had not gone to their work, and the saloons of Purgatory City were doing a thriving business, for thither had congregated the wild spirits of the valley, and all were discussing the whys and wherefores of the case of the Vigilantes vs. Ralph Reno.

The Guide was a popular man, or had been, in Paradise Valley, and he was known to be as brave as a lion, and true as steel, and many had at first hoed the idea of his having shot Velvet Face in the back, as Kansas Kit had said; but circumstantial evidence was drawing around him a web from which there seemed no escape.

Just after noon, into Purgatory City rode four persons, and dismounted at the large shanty, which courtesy designated as "the hotel," and in the spacious dining-hall of which

the trial was to be held, the landlord having offered it, and added:

"Thar will be oceans o' time for ther trial atween dinner an' supper."

By this remark landlord Lem Williams had shown a knowledge of Purgatorian human nature in a wonderful degree.

"Glad ter see yer, Mr. Merle, an' you, ladies, also you, Pard Godfrey,; git down and come inter ther hotel, an' yer shell hev ther best seats," said landlord Williams, and he ushered the party of four into what courtesy was again stretched to that extent as to call it a "parlor," but which, in a more civilized spot, a blind man would never have mistaken as such, for wooden boards around the walls served for seats, and wings of birds, skins of wild animals, elk, mountain sheep, and buffalo horns ornamented the walls, and completed the furnishing of this very unique room.

"Been ter dinner, Mr. Merle?" asked Lem, politely.

"Yes, thank you, landlord."

"You is welcome, if you hasn't, for we hev plenty, ther' bein' a run on grub ter-day; but ther last table is now grubbin', an' then we'll cl'ar fer action, an' ther trial will begin; ther boys is now bettin' ther' dust on ther verdict, an' ef a jury is app'inted, they chip in together, bet ag'in' ther'selves, an' hedge on a verdict o' guilt in ther fust degree."

A few moments of impatient waiting and the room was cleared of its tables and benches, and the crowd began to assemble, the miners giving the ladies of the settlement the front seats.

The men known as Vigilantes then marched in, and their spokesman, Lew Baker, said, aloud:

"Mr. Merle, we has elected you judge o' the court."

"I thank you, gentlemen, but it's an honor I beg to decline, as the one to be tried has rendered me many a kind service, and I feel a most friendly regard for him."

"Waal, sir, we wants ter see justice done in this heur case, an' tho' it's ag'in' jedgement in some courts ter put a woman forward, we waives ther rights an' wrongs o' ther thing now, an' names yer pretty darter fer judge, or jedgess, as ther word may be."

All eyes turned upon Muriel, whose head dropped a moment, as though to hide the pallor of her face; but, as though acting under some sudden impulse, before her surprised father could reply for her, she arose and faced the Vigilantes, while in firm, distinct tones she said:

"I thank you, gentlemen, and I accept the honor."

A hum of applause ran around the crowded room, and Mr. Merle, dumb with amazement, gazed upon her; but she held forth her hand to Lew Baker, and was escorted to the dry-goods box, on which a chair had been placed for the judge.

As she took her seat, every hat came off as if by command, and every eye turned upon her; no, not all, for Ralph Reno, seated just in front of her, bound hand and foot, and with Dick Hazel upon one side of him and Kansas Kit on the other kept his eyes upon the floor.

"Oh yes! oh yes! the court is called to order!" sung out Lew Baker, and a silence like death fell upon the room, which was at last broken by Muriel, in a low but distinct voice, asking:

"Prisoner, have you decided upon any one to defend you?"

Ralph Reno looked up straight into the eyes of his fair judge, and arose with an effort to his feet, while he answered calmly:

"Why should I ask any one to perjure himself to defend me for that which he believes me guilty of?"

"Then you desire no one to plead for you?"

"I will speak for myself and then abide the result," was the calm reply.

"Then speak, for you are accused of a grave charge: of having fired upon one and killed him, one who had no reason to expect from you a shot in the back," and Muriel Merle fixed her eyes upon the prisoner, who met her gaze unflinchingly, while he answered firmly:

"I brand the charge as false; I left your home that night, and rode at once to my cabin, got my arms and tools, and started for the mountains to prospect for gold."

"While in the mountains my horse fell with me, and stunned and hurt, I lay some time upon the ground, but recovering consciousness, I looked around me, to see my steed feeding not far away, and cropping out of the bank above me was gold ore."

"The sight of the yellow metal momentarily cured my aching limbs, and I arose and made a close examination, and discovered that I had struck it rich; then I again became unconscious, and it was dark when I awoke with fever."

"Fortunately I had food with me, water was near, and I did not suffer the days I remained there awaiting to be able to return to the settlement."

"I have nothing more to say."

The straightforward story of the Guide impressed many with the belief that he had

spoken the truth; but no change upon Muriel's face showed what impression it had made upon her, and she said, as the prisoner resumed his seat, evidently still suffering bodily as well as mentally:

"May I ask why you did not await at your cabin for Velvet Face, when he told you he would go there that night, and wished you to aid him in developing the mine he had discovered?"

"Yes, I will answer your question," and Ralph Reno again arose, and, after a slight hesitation, resumed:

"You will remember that I left you that night under most painful circumstances, and my mind was in that condition I failed to recall my engagement with Velvet Face until the following day it came to me when I found the gold ore."

"With but one object in view I left Sunset Retreat that night, and that object I accomplished, for I found what I sought—gold."

Once more the prisoner sat down, and Muriel said:

"We have now heard the story of the prisoner; let the witnesses be called!"

"Mr. Merle!" sung out Lew Baker, and the ex-banker arose.

"The Vigilantes, who act as jury, wish to know if you can tell anything regarding this affair, as to the guilt or innocence of the prisoner?" said Muriel.

"Nothing, more than that I believe him innocent, in spite of the circumstantial evidence that will be brought against him."

"Dick Hazel!" called out Lew Baker, the crier for the impromptu court.

"I am here, pards," and the honest-faced miner arose.

"What have you to say in this case?" asked Muriel.

"First, I hate to believe a man with the honest face of Ralph there can be guilty of wrong, and leastways that he would shoot a friend in the back; but he left Sunset Retreat afore the shooting some quarter of an hour, an' he went down the trail toward whar it were done; then he disappeared thet night, and he comes back with gold, and, I hopes I am wrong, Miss Mu'el, and you, pards, but I b'lieves he knows about the killin'."

"Kansas Kit!" called Lew Baker as Dick sat down, and that worthy arose.

"Well, sir, what have you to tell?" quietly asked Muriel.

"I was a-comin' 'long ther river trail and passed two men talkin'; one were Velvet Face, on horseback, and t'other I thought, and thinks, were ther prisoner thar."

"They was talkin' purty lively as tho' they was mad, but hushed as I comed up, an' lookin' back I see'd that Velvet Face were ridin' away, and then I see t'other man raise his revolver an' fire."

"Ther horse bounded off, an' Velvet Face fell over on his neck, and I was so took aback I c'u'dn't do nothin' fer a minute; but then I runned down to ther spot, an' Pard Reno, as I tuk it, were gone; p'haps ther Obinee heathen kin tell yer suthin' 'bout it, as I seen him skoot arter the shot, for he were comin' from ther river with a bucket o' water."

All eyes turned upon Washee Washee in surprise, for he had not before been suspected of knowing anything about the affair; but he glanced at Muriel, and what he saw in her face either made him forgetful of what he had seen, or caused him to tell a prompt lie with a face that was the picture of innocence.

"What do you know, Washee Washee, regarding the shooting of Velvet Face?" asked the fair judge.

"Washee know nothin'; he gottee no sense allee samee Melican man," was the reply, and it caused Kansas Kit to say:

"Beggin' yer parding, jedge, but he's a durned liar, or he was so skeert he don't remember it."

"I think we can get along without his testimony—"

"Yas, miss, for I w'u'dn't believe ther heathen on a Bible oath; but does yer want any more witnesses?" said Lew Baker.

"Are there others to testify?"

"Guess not, miss; Kansas Kit hain't blind, an' he knows ther prisoner, an' he seen ther shootin', an' ther Guide ran away arter it, altho' he hed a engagement with Velvet Face at his cabin, an' he comes back two weeks arter, with gold he has found, an' it pears ter me as he tuk ther trail o' ther Border Bravo, found his mine, arter hev'in' put him out o' ther way o' wantin' it, so it is left ter you, miss, ter call on ther Vigilante jury fer ther opiaions on ther case, an' thet will either cl'ar or hang ther prisoner," and Lew Baker resumed his seat, while Muriel, deadly pale, but perfectly calm, said in distinct tones:

"Vigilantes, stand up!"

In a body a score of men arose and gazed upon the fair judge.

"One by one, as I ask you, give your opinion as to the guilt or innocence of the prisoner."

They bowed in silence, and one by one they answered the dread word:

"Guilty!"

CHAPTER XIV.

OUT OF THE DEPTHS.

"Guilty!"

The word caused an almost universal start, and a low hum ran around the room, for all knew what must follow—death.

Death to that magnificent-looking man, Ralph Reno, accused of an assassination.

In that jury of Vigilantes, a score of men elected to run the machinery of life in Paradise Valley, and who had the power to call in others as they wished to aid them, there had not been one dissenting voice from the charge of guilt.

A fearful silence followed the polling of the Vigilantes by Muriel, and then her clear voice was again heard, and in it there was a deep tremor.

"Rise, Ralph Reno, for you are pronounced guilty."

The prisoner arose and faced the beautiful woman who was his judge, and his face, though very pale, was calm and fearless, while Muriel continued:

"As it falls upon me to pass sentence upon you, I now demand that, within the hour, you leave this valley and its vicinity, never more to come here, under penalty of death at the hands of the Vigilantes."

A movement of uneasiness ran through the crowd at this sentence, the prisoner started and seemed bewildered, and the Vigilantes looked black, while Lew Baker said, angrily:

"Miss, you is jedge, by our selection, but yer has no right ter let thet man go free o' punishment."

"There is a doubt in my mind as to his guilt, though I may have better cause for believing him so than any here; if I err, it shall be on the side of humanity," was the calm reply of the fair judge.

"Why, if we let him go out of this heur shanty, he c'u'dn't git out o' ther valley without somebody putting a bullet in him."

"I will escort him beyond the valley myself," was the cool reply, but before Lew Baker could reply to this bold announcement, Ralph Reno arose once more and said:

"Men, my fair jedge has shown me mercy, when I did not expect it from her, and I will tell you why."

"The night I left her home I was a discarded lover, for I had offered her my heart and hand, and she had refused it."

"Driven mad with jealousy, I charged her with loving Velvet Face, and I swore that she never should be his wife."

An intense excitement here pervaded the room, and Mr. Merle and Camille hung, breathless upon the prisoner's words, whom now they, for the first time, believed guilty.

"Then I left the house," resumed Ralph Reno, in the same calm tones, "and a short while after Velvet Face was shot."

"Believing that Miss Merle loved Velvet Face, I felt confident that she accepted the position you gave her, to revenge his death by urging my execution; but I bitterly wronged her by the thought, for now I know that she became my judge to save me, not believing me guilty."

"She has sentenced me, but well I know that such sentence you will waive, and, I say to you, I am in your hands."

He turned to the Vigilantes as he spoke, and awaited for them to speak.

In low tones they conversed together for a few minutes, and then Lew Baker turned to Muriel, and said:

"We is sorry to go ag'in' yer, miss; but ther prisoner has said he swore ter kill Velvet Face, an' he must die; we thanks yer for yer service, miss, but we must hang ther prisoner, or thar w'u'd be no justice in Paradise Valley."

A burst of applause greeted this decision of the Vigilantes, and it was plain that the Purgatorians did not wish to be disappointed, after having their excitement-appetites whetted up for a hanging.

Seeing the painful position in which Muriel was now placed, Mr. Merle and Guy Godfrey arose together to take her from her seat, and instantly loud cries rung through the room:

"Turn him over to Judge Lynch!"

"String him up!"

"Hang him!"

"To Death Canyon with ther murderer!"

"Hold!"

Above the din of voices arose the one word, and in tones that drew every eye upon the one who uttered it.

Then a silence of death fell upon that mass of humanity, for every tongue seemed struck dumb, as the tall form of Velvet Face was seen in the open door.

One look at the man whose supposed murderer they were trying, then an instant of breathless silence, and through that room rung a shout that nearly drove landlord Williams crazy with fear of his house flying to pieces.

Then again silence fell upon all, and Muriel Merle saw the supposed dead man come forward, and all noticed that he was not alone, for his hand rested on the shoulder of a tall, slender form, clad in buckskin, and with hands bound behind his back.

"Great God! Muriel, my child, see!" cried

Malcolm Merle, in trembling tones, gazing upon the stranger.

But the eyes of the maiden were already riveted upon him, and she said in awe-struck tones:

"Is it an apparition?"

"No, Miss Merle, that man is my bitterest foe, and—he is my twin brother," and more pallid now than when death by hanging had cast its shadow upon him, Ralph Reno turned toward the very man whose absence had so nearly cost him his life, and the one he held as a prisoner, and who was certainly the counterpart of the Guide in face and form.

CHAPTER XV.

A MYSTERY SOLVED.

RAISING his sombrero to Muriel and Camille, as he approached, for room was given him on all sides, Velvet Face, with his hand still resting on the shoulder of his prisoner, said in his clear, decided tones:

"I was told without that a man was being tried here for having killed me; it looks as though, with their usual hastiness, the Vigilantes had made a sad mistake."

"Hold on, pard, we don't low criticisms on our acts," angrily cried Lew Baker.

"Then, instead of being the Regulators of Justice, as you profess, you descend to the level of cutthroats," was the fearless retort, and as Velvet Face looked straight in the eyes of Lew Baker, that personage did not consider it his duty to reply, and the Border Bravo continued:

"Being one of the interested parties in this matter, I beg to interfere, and inquire why a man, whom I deem my friend, is dragged here to be banged like a dog, for the supposed crime of having killed me?" and the eyes of Velvet Face flashed with anger, and the Vigilantes remaining silent, Muriel said:

"Two weeks ago, sir, the night you took supper at Sunset Retreat, a shot was heard shortly after the departure of Mr. Reno, and a witness states that you were seen in angry conversation with the Guide, who, as you rode away, turned and fired upon you, and, either wounded or killed, you fell forward on the neck of your horse, which bore you to the Devil's Ladder, where all trace of you was lost."

"This is strange, for I left the valley just after departing from your home, Miss Merle, and meeting one who gave me information of an important character, I have not been back until to-day; but did you all not know that Ralph Reno could not be guilty of an act so vile?"

"Hold on, pard; 'pearances is deceivin', folks say; but I seen you that night, and thought I recognized Ralph here, tho' now I sees ther ger-loot yer has yer grip on, I is a leetle mixed jist now 'bout that; but as Ralph run off thet night, and jist returned yesterday with gold he'd struck in ther mountains, it did look suspicious like ag'in' him," and Kansas Kit arose and confronted Velvet Face, anxious to clear his own skirts.

"I admit, Reno, matters did cast a shadow on you; but I had no such meeting as described with you, as you well know."

"True, but why try and convince men to the contrary, when they are bent on carrying out Scripture in the one particular that suits them best; that is 'An eye for an eye, and a life for a life'?" said Ralph, calmly, and Kansas Kit again put in:

"Then who in thunder was it, ef it wasn't you, pard?" and he turned to Velvet Face who answered:

"Might this not have been the personage you mistook for Mr. Reno?" and he turned his prisoner around so that Kansas Kit could see his face.

"Durned ef I don't believe he were ther galoot; yer see it were moonlight, and I couldn't see plain as day, but somehow his rig now catches my eyes as it did thet night; but I w'u'd hev sworned thet ther face was Ralph Reno's; who ther devil are he, nohow?"

"He is a gentleman whom I took for Mr. Reno, and approached in the mountains, and he undertook to master me, and found it a case of the biter bitten; in fact, he is one of Jean Leo's Danites."

A howl of rage followed this announcement, that caused the prisoner to turn deadly pale, and Ralph Reno to look around nervously, while Kansas Kit asked:

"But he may hev been ther feller I tuk fer Ralph; but who in thunder was ther one I tuk fer you, pard?"

"He was mounted on a black horse?"

"Yas."

"Was he dressed as I am?"

"Fact!"

"The same style of sombrero?"

"Thet's it, pard."

"And h's face?"

"Was shaved clean as a padre's, same as yourn."

"Then it was Jean Leo himself."

This announcement also caused an intense excitement to pervade the room, and all eyes turned upon Velvet Face, who continued, as he cast his piercing gaze upon the prisoner:

"Perhaps you can tell us, sir; was your

chief, Jean Leo, in the Paradise Valley two weeks ago?"

"He was," came the answer, in an indifferent tone.

"And you met him there?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

"If my liberty is promised me, I will tell you all," was the cunning remark.

"No, we care not to know more than that it was yourself and Jean Leo, instead of Reno and myself, that Kansas Kit saw that night; but one question I will ask you, and that is if your chief is dead?"

The man hesitated a moment and then said:

"He is not."

Seeing that Velvet Face would not question him further, the prisoner said:

"I will tell you, if you promise to let me go, why Jean Leo came to the valley, and why an attempt was made to kill him."

"I will make you no promises; you are a member of the Danite League, for when I captured you I found their disguises upon you, and, as such, you should be dealt with, and I turn you over to the Vigilantes," said Velvet Face, severely.

"Hold on, one minute; I confess that I came to this valley two weeks ago, and it was to meet Jean Leo here."

"We had words, because I would not aid him in a plot against the settlers, and threatening to punish me, as Danites only can punish one they turn against, he rode away, and I fired upon him, and my bullet glanced on his skull, temporarily stunning him."

"Strange to say, he did not suspect the shot to come from me, but from that person, I suppose," and he pointed to Kansas Kit, "who had just passed us, and I returned to our retreat unmolested, and found him there, for he went by the way of the Devil's Ladder."

"Now I am tired of the life I lead with the Danite League, and if you swear to set me free, I will betray them to you."

"The Vigilantes may do as they deem fit; as for myself, I would not trust you, and as for Jean Leo and his band, their days are numbered; here, gentlemen, is your prisoner if you wish him?"

"Oh, we wants him, an' is obleeged to yer, pard, for ther present, for we set forth ter hev a hangin' an' guesses we'll hev one; but we is all uncommon sorry we misjudged our pard Reno, for ef our pretty jedge hadn't 'a' gone ag'in' us, he'd 'a' been cold meat afore now."

"You must excuse us, Ralph, an' ef yer wants ter kick me I won't say nothin', an' I guesses t'other Vigilantes will let yer gi'n them a 'hist too," and Lew Baker half-turned his back to Ralph Reno, as if expecting to have the latter kick him.

"No, no, Lew, it's all right, I suppose; only be a little more careful in future before stringing a man up," said Ralph.

"Yes, for not long since I saved six innocent people from your vengeance, when you were led on by Carl of Colorado, a man who was a spy in your midst, as he is a member also of the Danite League; come, Reno, I wish to see you," and Velvet Face turned away, but stopped as the Danite prisoner called to him, and said in a whining tone:

"You are leaving me in dangerous hands, sir."

"True, you deserve to be."

"You will not accept my offer?"

"To betray your comrades, no!"

"I can tell you a secret that this valley is interested in."

"I care not to hear it."

"That man will vouch for me, for I am his brother," and he pointed to Ralph Reno, who turned quickly and said:

"Alas! that it is so; yes, you are my twin brother, and you have made my very life a curse."

"And you will see these men hang me as though I were a dog?"

"Your crimes deserve it," was the stern response.

"Hard words to come from a brother's lips to a brother, Ralph."

"I admit it, Paul; but our paths in life divide here, even if yours go to the grave; farewell, and may God have mercy upon your wicked soul."

Turning, Ralph Reno passed quickly out of the room, and the Vigilantes determining to keep the Danite until the morrow, to get what information they could from him, Lew Baker, in loud tones, dismissed the crowd as follows:

"This hear court is adjourned until next time; but from 'pearances, I guesses yer'll all be invited ter a hangin' ter-morrow, as this pilgrim from Salt Lake looks uncommon unhealthy."

CHAPTER XVI.

THE BROTHERS.

As the shadows of evening crept over the valley, a party of seven persons were assembled in the sitting-room of the Sunset Retreat, for Mr. Merle had asked Velvet Face and Ralph Reno home with him, and Muriel and Camille had

followed, escorted by Guy Godfrey and Dick Hazel.

Upon entering the cabin and finding the man there, whose life had been so nearly forfeited to a fatal mistake, Muriel had gone up and offered her hand, and said frankly:

"Mr. Reno, if I seemed unmaidenly to-day, or unkind, in becoming your judge, believe me, I acted to save you, for, even had you been guilty, I cared not to see you punished as those men intended you should be; let us be friends."

The lip of the strong man quivered, and, after an effort at self-control, he answered:

"Let us forget the past, and be friends, Miss Muriel."

"I guesses I ought ter ask pardon too, pard, for I was a leetle too fresh in pressing you against the wall; but I would have done the same against Velvet Face, ef it had been said he had put you out of the way, as was said of you."

"I have a heart, if it is beneath a miner's shirt, and from to-day you can call me your friend."

To the surprise of all, even to that of Guy Godfrey, his inseparable companion, Dick Hazel, had suddenly dropped the border slang and style of speaking, and let out the secret that he had in the bygone seen better days.

Ralph Reno grasped his hand warmly, and then, after some hesitation, said:

"I may as well tell you all why it is I have the feeling against my brother that to-day I showed; but the truth is, my affection for him ended years ago."

"Let the buried past remain buried, Reno, for I assure you none of us feel any idle curiosity to hear a story that must needs be painful to you to tell," said Velvet Face, quickly.

"No, I prefer to tell you why I seemed to hate rather than love my brother."

"He is my twin, and from the day of our birth my parents showed a strange partiality to him, which I felt deeply as I grew older, and I fear it warped my nature."

"As we grew to boyhood, Paul had a private tutor at home, while I was sent off to an academy; but all this I stood with patience, until one day a forgery of my father's name was committed for a large amount, and it was traced to Paul, but I was the sufferer, for the bank official could not tell one of us from the other, and would not swear which of us it was that drew the money, and my parents finding, as they said, certain damning proofs of guilt in my desk, I was tried and sentenced to the penitentiary for years, for they made no effort to save me."

"Those proofs were taken from my brother Paul's desk and placed in mine, and conscious of my own innocence I made my escape from prison, and with some money I had in bank became a wanderer about the world."

"Some time after I learned that my brother had gotten into pecuniary difficulties, from which my father refused to extricate him, and hot words following, in some way they came to blows, and Paul was a fratricide."

"He made his escape, but the blow killed our mother, and from that day my life has been dogged out of me by my brother, who seemed to track me wherever I went, well knowing that I would not give him up to justice."

"The last I heard of him he was in Salt Lake City, and to-day I know him as one of Jean Leo's Danites, and, as you know, his presence in the valley two weeks since nearly caused me to be strung up as your murderer, Velvet Face."

"Well, he'll not trouble you after to-morrow, Reno," said Mr. Merle, laconically.

"No, for I am confident the Vigilantes will hang him; now, if you will excuse me, I will go and look after some little matters, and, if you will be my guest, Velvet Face, I will come by for you, and we'll go to the cabin together."

"Thanks; I'll accept the invitation, Reno, but stop for me at the upper camps, for I wish to see several of the miners," and, declining Mr. Merle's offer of a room, Ralph Reno, evidently deeply impressed with what he had gone through, left Sunset Retreat, and mounting his horse, which had been kept in Mr. Merle's stables, rode down the valley toward Purgatory City.

Avoiding observation as much as possible, the Guide at last halted before an isolated cabin, that stood on the outskirts of the little hamlet, and was sheltered by a thicket.

The place was dark, but before the hut door paced a tall miner.

It was Kansas Kit, and as Ralph Reno approached he called out, sternly:

"Halt, pard! thar's a treasure in heur, a leetle more precious than gold-dust; keep off, for I is told ter shoot, not chin, with any one comin' heur."

"It is I, Ralph Reno, Kit, and I wish to talk with you."

"Stand right thar, pard, jist whar I kin keep my eye on yer, an' say yer say."

"I wish to talk to you about the prisoner, my brother."

"I knows it; yer big heart kinder has ther bleed fer him, an' yer'd like ter hev him skip; I was ag'in' yer to-day, pard, but I knows yer ter be a sinner 'bout clean through, an' I wouldn't

hev b'leived nobody else's eyes than mine; but I were a liar clean through; but yer is uncommon like ther Danite, bean't you?"

"I am, and I do not blame you for the mistake, Kit; now tell me, is my brother in that cabin?"

"He be, and I are put heur to guard him straight from any harm, and read his title clear, as they says in hymn books."

"What is the decision of the Vigilantes?"

"Ther decish is thet he are too good for this 'arth, an' they intends ter give him a h'ist ter ther next."

"They have had a talk with him, then?"

"Yas, he chinned 'em deaf, dumb and blind; offered ter give 'em ther whole Danite League fer his life, an' ter give Old Nick his soul ef he didn't act squar'."

"And the result, Kit?"

"What result follows Vigilante meetin's, Ralph? You oughter know."

"I do; they have sentenced him to die?"

"Yas."

"When?"

"To-morrow."

"How?"

"He'll become tree-fruit."

"They'll hang him?"

"Yas, for powder and lead are expensive luxuries we can't afford on Danites. I tell yer, pard, they got all he could tell 'em, an' then says they:

"'Good-night an' pleasant dreams, pard,' an'—

"'We'll wake an' call yer 'arly, call yer 'arly, Danite dear, An' ter-morrer 'll be ther gladdest day in all our glad new year."

"Yer see they is poets, pard, right out o' Postville."

Ralph Reno showed no appreciation of Kansas Kit's remarks, but remained sadly silent for a moment, and then said:

"Kit, that man, bad as he is, is my brother, and he has caused me much sorrow and suffering in the past; but, before he dies, I wish to talk with him, and I hope you'll not refuse my request."

"Pard, it hain't in me ter refuse yer, bein' as how I likes yer, an' nearly caused yer ter hand in yer checks ter-day; but yer must leave yer arms outside, ef yer goes in, fer thet feller are a devil, ef he is your kin, an' I don't want ter see him prancin' out o' thar with a shootin'-iron in his claw, an' makin' it lively fer me."

"Here are my weapons, Kit," and he handed the miner his belt of arms, and taking a revolver in each hand, and his place in front of the door, Kansas Kit motioned to him to enter, and unfastening the bolt Ralph Reno stepped inside the hut, and was instantly locked within by the cautious guard over the Danite.

But, with all his caution, Kansas Kit did not see a dark form glide up to the shadow of a tree near the prison cabin.

CHAPTER XVII.

A CONFESSION AND A PLEDGE.

THE prison-cabin, which Ralph Reno entered to see his evil brother, was built of stout logs, had heavy beams across the top laid close together, and a flooring of timber a foot in diameter.

In fact, it was a log cage, rather than house, and with a guard on the outside of the heavy door, it was utterly impossible for a person within to make his escape, even if left to himself.

In the hut was a pile of bear-skins in one corner, to serve as a bed, and a lantern, with a candle in it, sat on a table and gave a dismal light.

Before the table, on a stool, sat Paul Reno, the Danite, and he glanced up as his brother entered, and recognizing him, said sneeringly:

"Ah! it is you, brother mine, and you have come to taunt me, I suppose?"

"No, Paul, I am here to talk with you, and to ask you to right one wrong you have done me, for to-morrow you will die."

"I know that, unless Satan still proves my true friend, and aids my escape in some way."

"I fear escape for you would be hard to manage, but as I do not wish to see you die, I will aid you all in my power."

"What! do you mean it, Ralph Reno?" asked the Danite, quickly.

"I do; I have a plan which I hope will aid your escape, for Paul, whatever you may be in sin, you are my blood kin, and blood is thicker than water, you know."

Paul Reno was silent a moment, and then he said in an earnest tone:

"Ralph, I have wronged you, for I never loved you, as I was jealous of you from infancy; nay, I it was who warped our parents' regard for you, and you know, as they did, that I forged that draft on the bank, and got the money, thereby to pay my debts, which were pressing me."

"Now, if you will promise to aid my escape to-night, I will give you my written statement that I, not you, was the forger, and the guard outside can witness it, for he need not know

that I meditate leaving—oh! we can get him in here, kill him, and—"

"Paul Reno, how dare you propose such a thing to me?"

"I tell you that I will do all in my power to aid you; but no harm shall come to Kansas Kit from it," sternly said the Guide.

"So be it; do as you think best; here, I have paper, and in this table drawer I noticed pen and ink—see!"

He drew from his pocket some blank paper as he spoke, and taking from the drawer a pen and bottle of ink, wrote hurriedly as follows:

"PARADISE VALLEY, August 10th, 18—.

"I, Paul Reno, doomed to die on the morrow, and now a prisoner to the Vigilantes of Paradise Valley Settlement, do hereby swear that, on the 1st of May, 18—, I was guilty of forging my father's name, that of Henry Reno, to a draft, on which I drew from the Commercial Bank of B—the sum of five thousand dollars, and which forgery being discovered, I swore falsely, laying the deed upon my twin brother, Ralph Reno, who was tried, and upon the testimony of my parents and myself, sent to prison for the offense."

"Standing in the face of death I now give this paper to my brother, and in the presence of my guard, Kansas Kit, whose signature is attached as witness."

"PAUL RENO,
"Patrick's and Forger."

"Can I add more, brother mine?" asked the wicked man, with a sneer.

"No, it is satisfactory, Paul, and I treasure it highly," said Ralph Reno, reading the confession carefully through, and then stepping to the door he called to Kit.

"Come in, Kit, for I wish you to witness a paper."

"All right, pard; but yer must excoose me ef I is a leetle cautious," and Kansas Kit entered, with his revolvers presented.

"I'll read it to you, Kit, and then sign it as a witness," and Ralph Reno read the document aloud.

"Jist both of yer step over in that ere corner, pards, while I scratch my autography heur."

Silently the two brothers obeyed, and with one hand still holding a revolver, he took up the pen in the other, and, after considerable delay, wrote in a superior specimen of chirography that surprised Ralph Reno:

"Kittredge Kane—
alias Kansas Kit."

"Thar yer has it, an' I are glad ter know thet thet reptile hain't as mean as I thought him ter be; and I is glad yer has ther doki-mint, Ralph."

Momentarily forgetting his caution, Kansas Kit turned to leave the cabin, when, suddenly drawing his arm from his breast, Paul Reno thrust it forward, and a deafening report filled the room.

But, quick as had been the motion of Paul Reno, that of his brother had been quicker, and he struck up the arm, and the bullet buried itself in the heavy logs above.

"Curse you, Ralph Reno, why did you do that?" cried the thwarted man.

"I am not one to allow you to kill a brave man to save your worthless life, Paul Reno," was the Guide's stern reply, and he still held his brother's arm in an iron gripe.

Though caught off guard, and wholly surprised, Kansas Kit took it most calmly, and said coolly:

"As the scrimmage is over, allow me ter say, pard Ralph, I owes yer one, for thet Derringer ball would hev made a stiff out o' me, but fer you; and you, you Danite devil, I'll jist say thet I'll see yer later, an' I guesses yer kin understand me."

"Curse you, I would have been free, but for you," muttered the disappointed man.

"No, I would have never allowed you to go free, had you killed Kit, Paul, unless you killed me, too."

"Which I would have done."

"I do not doubt it, if you could have done so; but patience ceases to be a virtue now, and your act against Kit relieves me of my promise," said Ralph Reno, and Kansas Kit once more stepped outside the cabin.

"No, no, for you know what will be my fate; I did not doubt you, Ralph, but I feared your plan might fail, and under the impulse of the moment, I drew a pistol which the Vigilantes had not found upon me."

"Forgive me, Ralph, and do not leave me here to hang like a dog."

Ralph Reno made no reply, and his brother continued pleadingly:

"Remember, brother, your parents were my parents."

"True, and from neither them nor you have I ever received even kindness."

"So be it; leave me here to be strangled to death before a gaping mob."

"Will you make me a pledge to give up your evil life, and, far from here, live the remainder of your days as an honest man?"

"I will gladly pledge myself to do so, only aid my escape."

"I will make then the attempt I had in view to save you; if successful, I will be back within half an hour—"

"If unsuccessful?" eagerly asked the Danite.

"Then, Paul Reno, this is our last meeting on

earth, and once more I say, may God have mercy upon your soul."

The Danite dropped his head upon his breast, and, with one long glance into the face, so strangely, startlingly like his own, Ralph Reno left the cabin, and a moment after the prisoner was alone with his bitter thoughts, his hopes of escape, and his damning fear of failure, and then death.

CHAPTER XVIII.

FOILED.

"KIT, I wish to have a little talk with you now," said Ralph Reno, as he left the prison-cabin.

"Buzz it out, pard; let it hum."

"Kit, you have not been very successful in mining, I believe?"

"You has kinder struck it, pard; ther dust don't kinder cling ter my pick an' shovel."

"How long have you been in the mines, may I ask?"

"Only a year in this valley; but I dug a leetle in Californy, an' then in Colorady, an' nowhere did I jist hit it right; true, I has struck it rich fer a leetle while, but then it didn't continue ter pan out liberal, an' when I has found a gold pocket, ther wasn't enough of 'em round ter make me happy, an' yer has ther whole streak of it now, pard, of how I has done."

"You expected to get rich, I suppose, and return to your family?"

"Pard, I did expect ter get rich, and—God bless you, Ralph Reno, don't make me think of the bygone, for it breaks my heart."

The Guide fairly started at the changed manner of the man; he had known of others on the border, who had drifted into the slang style of frontiersmen in their conversation, when they knew better, and many of them had received educations; but he had not looked upon Kansas Kit as of this kind, but believed him uncouth and ignorant, whatever his vices or virtues might be.

"I have been more successful, Kit," he said, quietly, "for I have received good pay as a Guide on the plains, and in the short time I have been mining in the valley I have struck it rich."

"So they said at yer trial, pard," replied Kansas Kit, drifting back into the old way of speaking he had before used.

"Yes; but it was not Velvet Face's lead I struck, but one I know has never been discovered before, and it is a rich one, I can tell you, and, Kit, if you'll do one thing for me, I'll take you in as half-partner with me."

"Ther deuce! you don't mean it, pard?"

"I do, and you know me to be a man of my word."

"Squar' clean through, you is."

"Then I will make you half-owner with me, and draw the papers up in the cabin, if you'll do as I wish."

"And what are that, pard?"

"Let me seize and bind you, and then free my brother; I will take all the blame, and tell the Vigilantes that I took you unawares."

"Ralph Reno," and the voice of Kansas Kit was very stern, as, after a slight pause, he continued:

"I am a poor man, and I was born a poor man; but I was raised by honest parents, and I have never done a mean act, or dishonorable one, intentionally, and, if you were to give me the whole of that mine, you couldn't tempt me to betray those who trusted me enough to put me over that devil in the cabin there."

Ralph Reno colored, for the words of the guard touched him; but he said, sadly:

"I am sorry Kit, for he is my brother, and I do not wish to see him die."

"You are not sorry, Reno, that I do not fall before your temptation, but honor me for it; but you are sorry that your brother should die as he is doomed to, and I honor you for that, as he has deeply wronged you."

"Then there is no hope for him, Kit?"

"None through me, for money cannot buy my honor; I tell you, Ralph Reno, I had a happy home once, though I was not a rich man by any means."

"Then I lived in Kansas, with my wife and child, and I loved them with all my heart."

"One time I went down into Texas after cattle, and was gone six months, and upon my return I had a shock I shall never forget."

"That was seven years ago, and it comes before me now as though it were to-day, for, Ralph Reno, a wolf in sheep's clothing had been in my snug little fold, and the wife that I so loved, the little daughter of eleven I so idolized, had fled from me forever; gone, the neighbors told me, with a Mormon who had won my wife over to his religion."

"I tell you, pard, I nearly died then, and for two years I let things go to weed, and then the sheriff sold me out, and I became a homeless wanderer, and to-night is the first time since then that I have written my own name, Kittredge Kane, and, thank God, I am not ashamed of it yet, though she who bore it as my wife dishonored it."

"I drifted this way, Ralph, and though I care not to see her who was my wife I would

like to know that she is not dead, and that my child is at least happy.

"Do you wonder now that I would not aid that Mormon Danite to escape after what I have suffered from those of his religion?"

"My poor Kit, we both have had our sorrows, and from to-night we are friends.

"I tried to save Paul Reno, but I can do no more; good-night," and Ralph Reno mounted his horse and rode slowly away, while Kansas Kit returned to his station beneath the live-oak growing in front of the cabin, and leaning his back against it became lost in painful memories of the past, and wholly oblivious to the fact that above him crouched a human form in the branches, watching him as a panther does its unsuspecting prey.

CHAPTER XIX.

A SURPRISE.

THE form that had glided to the shelter of the live-oak tree when Ralph Reno entered the cabin, had peered cautiously around for an instant, and then, watching his opportunity, had darted back into the thicket.

For a couple of minutes he ran lightly along, and then halted by a horse, that with head muffled was standing hitched to a tree and saddled and bridled.

Untying the animal, the person, whose actions were certainly mysterious, led him around cautiously to the rear of the cabin, and there again hitched him, while he listened to the hum of voices within.

But the logs were too thick, and arranged too closely together, to catch a word of what was said, and he lightly clambered to the roof, and heard Kansas Kit called into the cabin by Ralph Reno, when he stepped on the live-oak branches that overhung the roof, and secreted himself just above where he had seen the guard stand.

Presently the shot in the cabin was heard, and it seemed to startle him; but he remained quietly on his perch until Ralph Reno came out, and Kansas Kit walked away a short distance with him.

"Great God! can they have killed him? No, no, he stops, and they talk together; oh, that I could hear their words," muttered the man in the tree, and eagerly he watched the two in conversation some fifty paces distant.

"Ah! Ralph Reno goes on and Kansas Kit returns to his post, and now I must act.

"I like that man, and will not harm him if I can avoid it; but his life even must not prevent my doing that which I have set out to accomplish.

"Yes, he comes to his stand beneath the tree; now for the blow, and it shall be just severe enough to stun him."

As he muttered these words he held out in his right hand a stout stick, and, as Kansas Kit stood in painful reverie, unconscious of danger, he received a blow upon the head that caused him to drop to the earth as though he had been shot.

Then quickly from the branches of the live-oak dropped the one who had thus far succeeded in his plan, whatever it might be, and leaning over the prostrate miner he quickly disarmed him, placing the weapons some distance off, where they could not be seen in the darkness, after which he glided to the cabin door and a moment after entered.

Paul Reno stood near the table, watching, with the look of a hunted wolf, the door, for in its opening he knew there was life or death to him, and he did not doubt but that his brother would keep his word if in his power.

"Ah, Ralph— But you are not Ralph," he said, quickly.

"No, Paul Reno, I am one who has come to save your life, though you have wronged me as bitterly as your brother," was the stern reply.

"Save my life? Who are you, that speaks to me?"

"No wonder that you do not recognize me in this attire, the common suit of a miner, where far different should have been mine; but it matters not who I am—back! do not approach me, but go, for the door is open, your guard lies unconscious without, and behind this cabin you will find a horse awaiting you; go!"

"Not until I know who you are?"

"Stand back, sir! if you value your life do not tarry, for any moment the Vigilantes may come here, or Kansas Kit revive.

"He'll never revive if I can reach him—"

"Hold! though I set you free now, Paul Reno, I would kill you as I would a dog, did you attempt to harm that man; go, I say!"

"Curse you, I care not who you are, or what the means of escape, so I go free—farewell, my unknown friend, and be careful, for they may hang you in my stead," and with a bitter laugh, Paul Reno left the cabin, and then paused, as if about to carry out his threat upon Kansas Kit, whose prostrate form he saw lying in the darkness not ten paces distant.

"Beware!"

It was enough, coming as it did from the one who had saved him, and Paul Reno said:

"I will not harm him if he is not already dead; but give me his weapons."

"He is not dead, only stunned, and you will

find your own belt of arms hanging to the horn of the saddle.

"You have no time to lose, Paul Reno, if you value your neck."

"I'll take the hint; good-by," and passing rapidly around the cabin to the rear, the Danite unfastened the horse that awaited him, threw himself into the saddle and rode away.

"Ah me! I have done a very foolish thing, I fear; but I could not help it.

"Now I will drag the miner into the cabin, and lock him in, as soon as he shows signs of recovering consciousness, and, as his shouting for help cannot be heard, it will give Paul Reno three hours' start, for his escape will not be discovered until midnight, when another guard comes to relieve poor Kit."

Walking up to the prostrate miner, the man who had so cleverly effected the Danite's escape, dragged him into the cabin, and laid him upon the bed of skins, just as he showed signs of returning consciousness.

Finding that the blow had cut a small gash on the head of the miner, he moistened a handkerchief with water from a canteen on the table, and bound it up, after which he stepped quickly toward the door, just as Kansas Kit opened his eyes, and said in rather strong language:

"What in perdition are ther matter with me?"

Quickly the Danite's rescuer closed the door, locked it on the outside, and placing the miner's weapons before it, darted away at a rapid run from the spot, apparently satisfied with his night's work in saving Paul Reno from the vengeance of the Vigilantes, for against the League to which he belonged, had dire revenge been sworn.

In the mean time, while the man, who had so cleverly taken his prisoner from him, was wending his way toward Purgatory City, Kansas Kit lay in a dazed kind of way upon the cabin floor.

Slowly his senses came back to him, but his head had a buzzing sound, as if it had been turned into a bee-gum, and he put his hand up to it, and found that it was bandaged.

"What in thunder hev happened?" he again muttered.

"I guesses I has had a attack o' illness, an' ther boys has been lookin' arter me while I were delir'us; no, I be durned ef I hain't been to a picnic, and hed a rum-pus an' some feller hes laid me out; but I must hev been awful drunk not ter felt this blow on my head, fer I feels clean bone in ther gap.

"Durned ef I hasn't gone crazy, I believes, for whar in natur' are I?"

"In ther prison-cabing, by thunder!"

"Lordy! now I recalls it; I was guardin' that cussed Danite, and— Blue blazes! he are gone, skipt, skooted, levanted, an' I are left ter mourn him."

As he spoke he sprung to his feet, but his head was dizzy, and he staggered badly for a moment, and rested his hand on the table and gazed round the room.

Then he moved to the door and found it fast, and feeling for his arms found that his belt, with his knife and revolvers, had been taken off.

"Waal! it has been a turn about fair-play game, I'm thinkin', for ther Danite are gone, an' I are here, snug as a flea on a bull-pup."

"So be it; he held trumps, and I gives up ther checks; he dances an' I pays ther fiddler; but how did it all happen?"

"Let me see! I was talking ter Ralph Reno, and he went away, and I went back and stood under the tree, and—yes, I remember I felt a crasbing upon my head, as tho' ther tree had tumbled down on me.

"That were it, and I were hit a hard blow and knocked down; and then things was oh-be-joyful for them as did it an' ther Danite.

"But who in thunder done it?"

"Waal, waal, who c'u'd hev did it but— Ralph Reno?"

"Ah! pard, thet wa'n't no squar' game ter play on me, and I didn't think it of yer.

"But ther will come a time o' settlement, ef I are like a caged monkey now, an' I'm thinkin' ther Vigilantes will conclude ter take pie, as they c'u'dn't git puddin', an' will string you up fer interferin' with thar biz, even if ther candidate fer h'istin' were yer brother.

"Waal, Kit, my pard, take it cool until ther relief comes, for howlin' beaur hain't no good, an' yer is losin' precious sleepin' time."

So saying he threw himself down upon the bed of skins, and, unmindful of his wounded head, sunk to sleep, with the determination to bide his time until the morrow.

CHAPTER XX.

A DOUBLE MYSTERY.

AFTER the departure of Ralph Reno from Sunset Retreat, Velvet Face did not remain very long, for, pleading an engagement at the mining camps, he departed, leaving the field clear to Guy Godfrey and Dick Hazel, both of whom enjoyed their visits to the Merle cabin far more than anything else in their lives.

At first Dick Hazel had feared that his pard, Guy Godfrey, had fallen in love with Camille,

the object of his adoration; but watching him closely he came to the conclusion that it was Muriel that had won the heart of the young teacher, and the honest miner was happy, and, like a school-boy, began to build up castles high in air, of the future when the two maidens would become Mrs. Hazel and Mrs. Godfrey respectively.

Seeing that Muriel looked fatigued, after the excitement of the day, Guy Godfrey arose earlier than was his usual custom, and suggested to Dick that it was time to leave, and the noble-hearted miner at once sprung to his feet, and said to Camille:

"I'll finish that story, Miss Camille, about my fight with the grizzly another time, for pard says I must go now."

"Very well, Mr. Hazel, but I shall hold you to your promise, for I do so love to hear your stories of adventure."

Dick Hazel looked delighted, and with a farewell grasp of the hand to each of the maidens, the two men departed, and the cousins had an opportunity to talk over the exciting scenes of the day, in the seclusion of their own room.

But hardly had they seated themselves for a confidential chat, when they heard the clatter of hoofs without, and a voice asked to see Miss Merle.

"It is Ralph Reno, Mu; go out and speak to him," said Camille, quickly.

Throwing her shawl around her, Muriel went out upon the piazza, and beheld a horseman waiting.

"Oh! it is you, is it, Mr. Reno?"

"Yes, Miss Merle, and I come with a request from my poor brother that you will visit him, for he has a confession he desires to make, and the Vigilantes beg that you will accompany me, as they believe you can get some important information from him."

"But why me, Mr. Reno?"

"He saw you to-day, and he says he wishes to make known to you a secret that will put you on your guard, for he knows of your former capture by Jean Leo."

"Will not to-morrow do?"

"No, for he dies at dawn; I will escort you thither, and return you to your home in safety; please go, Miss Merle, for the request comes from one about to die."

"I will go with you, and while I put on my riding-habit, will you kindly ride around the house to Washee's but and ask him to saddle Featherhoof for me?" and Muriel reëntered the house, while Reno went to look up the Heathen Chinese.

By the time that Muriel came out upon the piazza, whip in hand, Washee led her horse around to the door, and, with a pleasant good-bye to her father and Camille, neither of whom liked this midnight visit to the doomed prisoner, she was raised to her saddle by Ralph Reno, and the two rode away at a rapid gallop, Mr. Merle remarking to his niece:

"Of course she will be safe with the Guide; but if I had known, Camille, just what we would have had to meet here, I would never have come."

"Don't get blue, uncle, for both Mu and myself are happy as larks, for we like this wild life, and your mine, with its hideous name, is 'panning out well,' as the miners say, and you may 'strike it rich,' you know," and Camille's joyous laugh drove the cloud from the brow of her uncle, and reëntering the cabin, they threw themselves down to rest, for they did not care to retire before Muriel's return.

Mr. Merle had quickly forgotten his troubles and dropped into a deep sleep, when he was aroused by a loud shout that quickly brought both Camille from the lounge and himself from his easy-chair to their feet.

"Hulloa!" again cried a loud voice without, and Mr. Merle went to the door, to discover half a dozen men on horseback, one of whom he recognized as Lew Baker.

"Well, Mr. Baker, anything wrong?" he asked, with a foreboding of evil.

"I should say so, Mr. Merle, everything's gone wrong, fer ther priz'ner hes levanted."

"What! Paul Reno, the Danite?" cried Mr. Merle, in alarm.

"Thet's him; we put him snug as a bug in a blanket, in ther prison cabing, an' Kansas Kit were ther guard over him; but Lord love yer, miner, the guard went ter relieve Kit, an' found him locked up inside, his arms layin' outside by ther door, an' ther priz'ner skipt."

"But who could have released him, Mr. Baker?"

"Thet's jist ther man ther Vigilantes is now cruisin' fer, an' his name are Ralph Reno."

"Impossible, he had come to hate and fear his brother, as I know, and—"

"Waal, they was sons o' ther same mother, an' Ralph weakened, and when he c'u'dn't git his brother out by bribin' Kansas Kit, he jist pretended ter go away, but sneaked back, tapped Kit on ther head, and then hed it all his own way, an' now we intends ter hev it our way, for he hes put hisself ag'in' ther Vigilantes, an' thet hain't a healthy perceedin' fer no man."

"But there surely must be some mistake, Baker, as it has not been an hour or a little over since my daughter Muriel went down to

Purgatory City to hear the confession of Paul Reno, and by your request."

"Pard Merle, we hasn't made no sich request; we has been, a party of us, playin' keerds in Purgatory City ter-night, and—"

"And you did not send Ralph Reno for my daughter?" asked Mr. Merle, in alarm.

"Nary."

"Great heavens! what can it mean? Surely the Guide meant no treachery; Camille, do you hear this?"

"Yes, uncle, and I cannot understand it, for Mr. Reno certainly came here for Muriel, and said the Vigilantes had requested her to come and hear the confession of the prisoner, that they might get at some Danite secret they wished to know."

"So I understood Reno to say, Baker."

"It are a lie, pard; we hasn't sent no sich word; when were Ralph Reno here, you say?"

"About an hour and a quarter ago."

"And two hours ago Kit was locked up in ther cabin; was yer sartin it were Ralph Reno, Mr. Merle?"

"Yes, he was dressed as the Guide dresses, looked and talked as he does, and—"

"Oh, uncle! what if it was Paul Reno?" cried Camille, her thoughts of evil and treachery suddenly finding vent in words.

"Great God! if it were that accursed Danite, my poor child is lost," and Mr. Merle groaned in agony of spirit, while Lew Baker said:

"We'll soon know, Mr. Merle; here, Bonanza Ben, go and see if Ralph Reno is at his cabin, and two of you fellers go along, and mind yer boys, bring him back with yer."

The men rode rapidly away, while Lew Baker sent others of the dozen comrades who accompanied him to rouse the miners in the camps, and settlers in the valley, and ask them to come at once, mounted and armed, to the cabin of Malcolm Merle.

"Now, Mr. Merle, I'll come in and we'll talk the matter over," said Lew Baker; but they could arrive at no definite conclusion what to do, and the poor father and Camille seemed almost heart-broken at the unknown fate of Muriel.

An hour passed away in suspense that was fearful, and then Bonanza Ben dashed up to the cabin, and dismounted.

"Waal, pard, what are ther tidin's?" asked Lew Baker, eagerly.

"Ther cabing o' Ralph Reno has no one in it, cap'n; but I sent ther boys scoutin' round, while I come back to tell yer, and on ther way I met ther Injun, Blue Snake, and his putty gal, Red Dove, an' they say as how Ralph Reno an' yer darter, Mr. Merle, went up ther road to ther mount'in some hour or more ago, an' ther horses was in a full run; but I are thinkin' it were not Ralph, but t'other one."

"My poor, poor child, may God have mercy upon you, if you are in the power of that man," and Mr. Merle sunk down in his chair, and buried his face in his hands, the very picture of grief, for now he felt certain that Muriel had been kidnapped by treachery, and Lew Baker spoke out the thoughts that seemed to be in the minds of all present, for he said, slowly:

"Pards, it looks as ef them two brothers was playin' some deep game tergether; but ther Vigilantes will sarcumvent 'em any time, and it's sartin that thar must be rope-stretchin' in this heur valley afore things is regulated proper."

CHAPTER XXI.

RED DOVE'S STORY AND MAD MYRA'S DISCOVERY.

THREE days passed away after the mysterious kidnapping of Muriel Merle and the disappearance of Velvet Face and Ralph Reno, for neither of the two had been seen since the night following the latter's trial.

The Vigilantes, adding to their force, had organized in three bands, one under Lew Baker, another electing Kansas Kit as leader, and the third having for captain Dick Hazel.

These three squads had diligently searched the mountains and valleys surrounding Purgatory City and the mines, and no trace of Muriel, the two brothers or Velvet Face could be found.

Blue Snake and Red Dove, who now came almost daily to the settlement with game and fancy-worked buckskin to sell, were questioned most thoroughly regarding what they had seen that night of the escape; but all they could recall was that, as they supposed, Ralph Reno and Muriel had dashed by them, the maiden bending over in her saddle, until her head almost touched the neck of her horse, and both of them riding like the wind.

The absence of Velvet Face seemed to be looked upon as strange, and caused universal regret, for somehow the miners felt that he could solve the whole mystery, and perhaps rescue the beautiful girl, even from the power of the Danites.

Toward sunset on the third day after the disappearance of Muriel two horsemen were riding slowly down the mountain road leading to Paradise Valley.

A glance was sufficient to show that they were Velvet Face and Ralph Reno, and there was that in their faces which showed they had

not heard any news of a disagreeable character, for they were chatting pleasantly.

Presently a slender form stepped out before them, and, with his habitual readiness to act either upon the offensive or defensive, Velvet Face had his revolver on a level in an instant; but quickly lowered it as he saw before him Red Dove.

"Well, my dark-skinned maid of the mountains, can we serve you in any way?" asked Velvet Face, pleasantly.

But it was at Ralph Reno that the Indian maiden looked, and she said, in her low, sweet way:

"The Guide has a brother?"

"I had a brother, Red Dove."

"He is not dead; he has an evil heart, and he has carried to the great many-squaw chief the fair Lily of the Valley."

Both men understood that she referred to Brigham Young as the many-squaw chief; but astounded at the information that Paul Reno had escaped and borne with him some fair maiden of the valley, they looked at each other in silence, and then at Red Dove, who continued:

"It is said that the Trail Chief took his brother away."

"It is false! I knew not that Paul had escaped, for I gave up hope of aiding him, when I could not bribe Kansas Kit, and I believed him dead; tell me, Red Dove, how did he escape?" quickly asked Ralph Reno.

"The guard was struck down, and the Danite was taken from the log wigwam."

"And they say I did this?"

"The Trail Chief has heard the words of Red Dove, and the pale-face warriors of the valley have looked far for the stolen maiden and her captor."

"And who was this maiden?"

The question came in chorus from the lips of the two men, while a sudden pallor crept over the face of each.

"The Valley Lily."

"Great God! it is Muriel Merle," cried Ralph Reno, remembering that she was so named by both Red Dove and Blue Snake.

In silence the two men regarded each other for an instant, and then Velvet Face said in his quiet way:

"Reno, ride on to the settlement and learn all that you can, while I will go to Echo Canyon and await you there, for that girl must be rescued if the Danite League has to be wiped out."

"You are right; but shall I not bring with me a band of miners?"

"No, for with force nothing can be done; we must use strategy wholly, and we must act quickly, so go at once; remember, I await you in Echo Canyon, two leagues from here."

"I shall be there," and Ralph Reno spurred away, while Velvet Face turned to the Indian girl, and said:

"You have heard my words to the Trail Chief; what we do must be done like the snake moves, and I need the aid of the Blue Snake and Red Dove; will they come?"

"They will; the Red Dove will seek the Blue Snake at once, and meet the Velvet Face in the Echo Canyon before the sun comes again," and the Indian girl turned away, and soon disappeared over the brow of the mountain, while Velvet Face sat in silent meditation upon his horse, gazing down into the valley below, yet not seeming to see one object that his eyes rested upon, for he was plotting the rescue of Muriel Merle.

For some time he sat thus, and then he started, for there came to his ears loud shouts from the valley below, and some strange excitement was reigning there, he well knew.

What could it mean?

Had Muriel been found?

Had the return of Ralph Reno excited this tumult?

Such were the thoughts that flashed through the mind of Velvet Face; but recalled to himself, by the noise, he slowly turned his horse and rode back up the mountain, for he remembered that he had work to do in the Echo Canyon ere he was joined by Ralph Reno and his Indian allies.

He had not ridden very far when he came to the spot from whence Muriel had looked down in Death Canyon, the day the Vigilantes had determined upon the execution of the "foreign" element in Purgatory City.

There, upon a rock overhanging the dizzy depths below, stood one who had before rendered Velvet Face good service, and she was looking down upon some wild scene beneath, while her face was pale and anxious.

It was Mad Myra, the Hermit Huntress of the Mountains, and her slender, beautiful form was swaying to and fro with the intensity of her feelings, while even her quick ears had not detected the approach of the horseman.

But the hoof of Midnight striking against a stone caused her to start and turn quickly, as though ready for instant action, be it friend or foe she had to greet.

"Ha! it is the Velvet Face! See! down there they drag your friend to death," she cried, excitedly.

Fearlessly Velvet Face spurred to the very edge of the rock, and what he beheld was a mass of wildly excited miners, and in their midst was a man they were dragging into Death Canyon.

And that man was Ralph Reno.

A cry of rage burst from the lips of Velvet Face, and down the mountain path he dashed at a pace that a wild mountain sheep would dare attempt, while, dropping upon her knees as if in prayer, Mad Myra watched the thrilling scene in the canyon below, and trembled with dread as she heard the clatter and ring of Midnight's unshod hoofs against the stones.

CHAPTER XXII.

SELF-ACCUSED.

THE scene that had caught the eye of Mad Myra, and so deeply moved her to compassion, was caused by the sudden appearance of Ralph Reno in the valley, riding at a rapid gallop in the direction of Sunset Retreat.

He had, just as he came in sight of the cabin home of Mr. Merle, suddenly met Lew Baker and half a dozen of his band going home after their day's work in the mines, and at sight of him a wild shout of joy was raised, and instantly he had been seized and dragged from his horse, for, not expecting treachery toward him, he had been unprepared to meet the sudden attack.

"Men, what means this outrage? are you mad?" he asked, angrily, as he writhed in the hands of his captors.

"It means, Ralph Reno, that you'll not escape this time, fer ef yer was innocent afore, yer is guilty now," replied Lew Baker.

"Guilty! and of what?"

"You an' yer Danite brother is pards, an' as he's got away through your aidin', we'll see thet you don't git off through his aidin'."

"Lew Baker, you are a liar! my brother has wronged me far more deeply than any one else, but I admit that I tried to save him from death, for I wished not to see him hanged; but I did not aid his escape."

"Talk's cheap, pard; but yer did help him off, fer Kansas Kit says so, an' he's true as Gospel."

"He also said that I killed Velvet Face; well, do your worst, you red hounds, for I see that you have your appetites whetted for blood, and life is really not worth the living," said Ralph Reno, calmly.

"We'll see how yer crow when ther rope is tightening; come, pards, fetch him along to Purgatory City, an' then we'll git a congregation tergether ter see ther hangin'."

And away the Vigilantes went with their prisoner, the numbers constantly swelling, and Mr. Merle and Camille joining the crowd, anxious to save Ralph Reno, for they could not believe him as bad as was reported by the excited miners.

As they reached Purgatory City the mob increased, and soon one-half of the dwellers in the valley were there, and upon the faces of two-thirds of those present was a determination to hang Ralph Reno, who they now felt convinced was nothing more than a disguised Danite, and whose running off with Muriel, after freeing his wicked brother, they considered the greatest of crimes.

"To Death Canyon with him!" yelled the mob.

"No need o' a trial."

"He's guilty!"

"String him up ter-night!"

"Try him ter morrow!"

"Off with him!"

"Death ter Danites!"

Such were the wild cries that broke from the crowd, and Ralph Reno glanced fearlessly at his accusers, his face pale, but firm, and a sneer upon his lips.

"Men, I have been away with Velvet Face, to our mines in the mountains; we met Red Dove, the Bannock maiden, half an hour since, and she told us of the escape of my brother, and the kidnapping of Miss Merle, and I came on to the valley to learn the full particulars, while Velvet Face rode on to Echo Canyon, where I was to meet him to-night."

"I tried to rescue my brother, but could not bribe Kansas Kit, and so left; now you have the whole truth," and Ralph Reno looked fearlessly into the faces of his accusers.

"Durned ef I don't believe he speaks ther truth, though I did doubt him; come, pards, let us let him off," said Kansas Kit, but like thunder the response broke from the crowd:

"Never!"

"We must save him, uncle, for he is not guilty; you try, Mr. Godfrey, and you, too, Hazel," cried Camille, anxiously.

But all entreaties were in vain, and at a word from Lew Baker the prisoner was dragged on toward Death Canyon, followed by the excited mob, among whom were Malcolm Merle and Camille, drawn by a fascination they could not resist.

At last the dismal canyon was reached, just as the last rays of sunlight fell across the valley, and Lew Baker ordered his men to throw a rope over the scarred limb of a tree that had before felt the tremor of many a dying form.

White, but fearless and full of nerve, Ralph Reno stood, and then the rope was placed around his neck, and a moment more would have ended his mortal career, when a loud cry was heard on the other side of the crowd.

"Hold! hang him not, for he is innocent."

"I saved Paul Reno from death!"

The crowd opened wide, and pallid, excited, and panting from a hard run, Oil, the Waif, bounded into their midst and confronted the Vigilantes.

CHAPTER XXIII.

THE VIGILANTES' VICTIM.

To say that the angry, excited crowd were amazed, thunderstruck, and most seriously taken aback at the astounding fact that a second time they had nearly executed an innocent man, would be to put it lively, for even men with the most brazen faces hung their heads, when they caught the triumphant, scornful glance of Ralph Reno sweeping over the sea of human countenances surrounding him.

And Ralph Reno was the first to speak, and he addressed his words to the discomfited Lew Baker, the Vigilante captain:

"Well, sir, what have you to say now, after being thwarted a second time in an attempt on my life?"

"We has only ther boy's word for it," was the sullen reply.

"It is not likely he will criminate himself to save a man for whom he did not care, Lew Baker; but, Oil, speak out and tell your story," and Ralph Reno turned to the Waif, whose face flushed as he met the gaze upon him of every one.

But after a slight hesitation, he said, in a clear, distinct voice:

"Mr. Reno, I owe my life, and the life of one that was most dear to me, to Paul Reno, and though afterward he did that which caused me to hate him as I would a snake, I cared not to see him die, and I freed him."

"How was it done, leetle pard?" asked Kansas Kit, forcing his way forward, and at the same time boldly severing the bonds that held Ralph Reno.

"I first took a fleet horse, the property of Carl the Killer, who left him in the valley pasture, and then I rode him to the thicket near the prison-cabin, and watched my chance to rescue the prisoner."

"I saw Ralph Reno go there, and Kansas Kit let him go into the cabin, and also entered himself, and I then climbed up on the roof and gained the branches of the live-oak tree and waited."

"I saw Mr. Reno leave the cabin, and, after talking with him awhile, Kansas Kit came back and stood under the tree, and then it was that I struck him with a stick."

"I meant only to stun him, and I succeeded, and then I unlocked the door and let Paul Reno out, and he rode away, while I dragged Kit into the cabin, bound up the cut on his head and left him; but if I had thought that Paul Reno was going to take away with him beautiful Miss Merle, I would gladly have seen him die ere I aided him, and my heart is almost broken to think that I was the cause of her sorrow," and the tears came into the boy's eyes, while Lew Baker said harshly:

"Waal, yer neck will soon be broke, too, boy, an' that will cure ther heartache."

"Yer hain't goin' ter hurt ther leetle pard, is yer?" asked Kansas Kit.

"We sartinly is; he are a confessed horse-thief, an' that is a hangin' crime in these diggins, an' he hev gone ag'in' us an' let ther Danite go free, an' been ther cause o' Miss Merle's misery, not ter speak o' ther achin' hearts o' her friends; ther boy hes run his neck inter ther noose, an' we is goin' ter pull on it, sure."

"No, no, men, you'll certainly not hang the lad," said Ralph Reno, earnestly.

"Now, I guess so, an' seein' as you has got off so nice, I'm thinkin' yer better not chip in," said Lew Baker, whose elevation to the captaincy of the Vigilantes had suddenly changed his nature, it seemed, and given him a desire to leave a red record behind him.

"I was to be murdered for a crime which I did not commit, Lew Baker, and this boy, by his noble confession, saved my life, and I cannot stand idly by and see him slain."

"Waal, what is yer goin' ter do about it, seein' as yer weepin' is in my keepin'?"

"Don't hang ther boy, Lew, fer 'tain't right, an' I says so," put in Kansas Kit.

"An' I says so, too, pards," said Dick Hazel, stepping forward to the side of Ralph Reno, while Guy Godfrey at once joined him, with the quiet remark:

"Here are four of us against it, Baker."

"Say see, Mr. Godfrey," and Malcolm Merle joined the others, while, as the crowd moved away from her, Camille Conrad glided forward, and said:

"Mr. Baker, I am but a girl, but I raise my voice too against your harming Oil."

"Ha! ha! ha! an unarmed man, a ex-banker, as they calls him, a teacher as c'u'n't hit a barn-door with a cannon, an' a gal, while only two is worth a flea-bite in a scrimmage; this looks like mutiny, pards, an' I guesses as how

ther will somebody hev ter run an' git more rope."

It was evident that the words of Lew Baker were received with favor by the general crowd, and that Oil the Waif would have to hang seemed also evident, for what could Kansas Kit and Dick Hazel, the only thoroughly armed men of his defenders, for Mr. Merle and Guy Godfrey wore but one pistol each, do among that lawless crowd?

"Leetle pard, we'll stand by you long as we kin," said Kansas Kit, with determination.

"No, let them hang me; let the wolves have my blood to satisfy them, for I have no one to care for me, and my life is not a happy one," said the boy.

"No, no, they will not be so cruel, so merciless," cried Camille.

"It's just what we will be, miss; this valley has ter be regulated, and we is goin' ter do it; we is a hundred men heur, an' it's better ter let ther boy come quiet then hev bloodshed among us, which will folter."

"Then, take me, and do your worst," and Oil the Waif sprung from amid his friends into the midst of his foes, and eagerly they seized, and almost instantly the rope was around his fair neck.

For an instant Kansas Kit, Dick Hazel, Guy Godfrey and Ralph Reno seemed about to spring into the crowd and attempt his rescue; but they saw it would be madness, and they hesitated, while the Vigilantes began to drag Oil the Waif toward the execution tree.

But suddenly they stopped, the crowd swayed wildly to and fro, and through a passageway opened for him, a horseman darted and drew rein, while his ringing tones fell on every ear:

"Hold here! what hellish work are you accursed Vigilantes at now!"

It was Velvet Face, and his piercing eyes fell upon the faces turned up to him, and in each hand he held a revolver, and his manner was most threatening, for upon his lips dwelt that smile that those who knew him were aware meant danger ahead.

CHAPTER XXIV.

THE BITTER BITTEN.

"Waal, pard o' ther soft face, yer is in at ther hangin', an' yer is welcome," said Lew Baker, feeling that it fell upon him to speak as every eye roved from him to Velvet Face.

"I am here in time to prevent your doing some devilish deed, I see," was the fearless response of the horseman.

"Pard, yer chin wags too brazen like; we is Vigilantes, and we is doin' our duty," replied Lew Baker.

"You are a set of bloodthirsty wolves, and I ask you what means the rope around that boy's neck?"

"That is our biz, pard."

"I have made it mine to find out; what does it mean, Reno?"

"Oh! they were going to hang me for freeing my brother, and this boy came just in time and confessed that he rescued him, and now they intend hanging him."

"They shall do no such thing."

"We tried to prevent, but you see the madness of our attempt with the odds against us."

"Bah! I say they shall not hang the boy."

The ringing words caused every one to start, for there was no bravado in the assertion, and those who knew of Velvet Face were aware that he made no idle threats.

Fearlessly he cast his eyes over the excited crowd, and then he continued:

"You men pretend to act justly, and the power you hold makes brutes of you; you would have hanged some innocent victims some time since, had I not prevented, and then you had Ralph Reno, trying him for a crime that had not been committed; again you wish to string him up, and find yourselves once more wrong, and now you seek to wreak your vengeance and disappointment upon that boy, whose services I need, as I go on the trail of the Danite and the lady he so cleverly kidnapped from your very midst."

"Oh, but you are a gallant crew!"

The withering scorn of the Velvet Face caused many, feeling that they were wrong, to slink out from under his burning gaze, and others, knowing his utter fearlessness, to also be willing to drop the affair.

But Lew Baker had gone too far to retract, and the insult to all was more directly thrown in his teeth, and he answered:

"Look heur, pard, yer may be ther Border Bravo, an' all that, but yer can't play yer brass chin-music inter my ears, an' not git tuk up."

"Aha! then you mean that you will resent my words?" and Velvet Face smiled his very sweetest.

"I does."

"And you will not give up the boy?"

"I will not; he's got ter hang."

"I warn you that I shall take him from you," and those who caught sight of the face of the fearless man who so recklessly confronted them moved out of the range of his eyes.

"It hain't in yer, is it, pards?"

But ere Lew Baker could say more, or his followers, who had rapidly fallen off in number,

could reply, there was heard a wild shout, and Midnight, with a mighty spring, was in the midst of the Vigilantes, and the iron clutch of his master was upon the throat of Lew Baker.

As though he were a mere child, Velvet Face dragged the man up before him in his arms, and seizing his lariat, that hung from his saddle bow, gave it a quick turn around the thick neck, and threw the other end over the limb of the tree above him.

"Now, men, drag this devil up in mid-air, for I say to you that he is a Danite!"

So sudden had been the charge of Velvet Face, so lightning-like his movements, that the nearest to him had been taken wholly by surprise, while several who would have aided Lew Baker were hurled aside by Midnight's irresistible passage.

Not a shot having been fired, those men, ever quick with their weapons, had drawn but not pulled the trigger, and the score of weapons that covered Velvet Face were instantly lowered at his startling words, and, in that momentary pause, half a hundred men, headed by Dick Hazel and Kansas Kit, had closed quickly around the daring man to protect him.

"He lies!" shrieked the now terrified Vigilante leader.

"I speak the truth as I will prove; ho, above there!" and Velvet Face glanced upward, to where was visible on the ledge of rock the woman all knew as Mad Myra, the Hermit Huntress.

"Well, sir!" came back in the clear, musical tones of the Hermitess.

"Who is this man?"

"One of the Danite League."

A murmur of amazement ran through the crowd, and Lew Baker, still held in the iron clutch of Velvet Face, shouted:

"She lies, too; if I am a Danite, why did I wish to hang Paul Reno?"

"For the reason that you wished him to die, as you are next in rank in your accursed League; I tell you, men, that Jean Leo is chief, Paul Reno his second in command, and then comes this wretch, and Carl of Colorado is the fourth officer, for I know them all well."

"Now let us free the valley of this spy, and take one devil out of the Danite League."

Loud shouts followed the words of Velvet Face, and above the confusion came his stern order:

"Here, drag this Danite up!"

Two-score willing hands quickly seized the end of the lariat, while Velvet Face skillfully bound the hands of the struggling wretch behind him, and Lew Baker was dragged up above the heads of those whom a moment before he was the leader of.

Sickened at the sight, Camille Conrad turned away with her uncle, and mounting their horses they rode rapidly away from the Death Canyon and the wildly-excited mass of humanity that filled it.

But, ere they had gone a mile on their road homeward, with sorrowful hearts, there came the clatter of hoofs behind them, and Velvet Face dashed up, his face as placid as though asleep, and behind him rode Oil, Midnight caring little for his double load.

"Mr. Merle, I am going to ask you for one of your horses on which to mount Oil, for he goes with me to-night after Miss Merle."

"Certainly, my kind friend, and from my heart I thank you, for I am almost crazed with despair of ever seeing my child again."

"Cheer up, sir, for Oil here knows the secret haunts of the Danite League, and Reno also goes with me, and he's a legion in himself."

"But I shall go, too, for—"

"No, no, Mr. Merle, pardon me for saying so, but you would only be in the way."

"You see we must accomplish by cunning what we cannot do by force, and I have some allies who will render invaluable service."

"And who are they, may I ask?"

"The Bannocks, Blue Snake and his pretty daughter; you see we will make a very formidable party."

"Yes, but a small one, for the League is all powerful," sadly said Camille.

"Life at best is but a risk, Miss Conrad, and we who live in danger of hourly death learn to guard against it in such a way that it makes us trebly strong; now I took big chances a while since, but I carried my point and saved Oil," and Velvet Face smiled sweetly.

"Indeed you did, sir; but I believed you would be slain, and yet the very man who led these wild spirits is now a corpse," and Camille shuddered, but, after a moment, said:

"Let me contribute to this expedition, for Oil shall have my horse, and Gipsy is as fleet as a bird."

"Thank you, miss," said Oil, the Waif, in his quiet way, and having reached Sunset Retreat they all dismounted, and were soon after joined by Ralph Reno, Guy Godfrey and Hazel, and all sat down to one of Washee's substantial suppers before the start on the trail of the Danites.

CHAPTER XXV.

IN THE TOILS.

To turn now to the one object of deep commiseration in Paradise Valley, poor Muriel.

who held the sympathy of every miner, woman and child in the settlement.

Without the slightest dread of treachery she had gone with the supposed Ralph Reno, and, engaged in conversation, had not noticed the way they were going until the mountains suddenly loomed up before them.

"Why, Mr. Reno, this is not the road to Purgatory City," she said, in surprise.

"I know it, Miss Merle, and I confess to having deceived you, fearing that your father would not let you come," was the quiet reply.

"But why deceive me, sir?"

"I will tell you; my unfortunate brother escaped from prison to-night, but was pursued and overtaken up in the mountains, after being severely wounded.

"Unable to bring him back with them, for fear of the movement causing instant death from hemorrhage, the Vigilantes sent me after you, and I thank you for coming; but let us hasten, as poor Paul may die ere we reach there, and the Danite secret he wishes to confess to you will never be known."

Still unsuspecting treachery, Muriel rode on at a rapid pace, pitying the man who was by her side, as his hoarse voice seemed to tell her that he felt deeply for the erring brother.

Suddenly before them loomed the forms of two persons, whom Muriel recognized, when she bent low in her saddle as she passed, to be the Bannock Indians, and her daring captor held his revolver ready for instant use, had there been any movement on the part of the maiden to show that she held the slightest suspicion of him.

And on they went, up the mountain-side to the top, and then the man turned off squarely to the left, in the same path that Muriel had before been led by her Danite captors.

"Mr. Reno, I have perfect confidence in your courage, but this is a dangerous locality, and I care not to go further," and Muriel drew rein.

"It is but half a mile, Miss Merle, and the Vigilantes being in the mountains, there is no dread of other danger; come, let us hasten, for I would see my poor brother alive."

And once more they continued their way, until Muriel felt that over a mile had been gone over since their last halt, and once more she drew rein.

"It is but a few hundred yards now; there, where you see that large tree," said the man.

"And that is where the Devil's Ladder begins."

"True, you have a good memory to recall the spot in the dark; my brother was caught as he was about to descend the Devil's Ladder, and now lies in the shadow of yonder rock," and as her captor spoke he gave the dismal hoot of an owl.

No answer came, and he repeated it several times, until there was heard in response the long-drawn-out howl of the mountain wolf.

"Why all this mystery, Mr. Reno?" asked Muriel.

"Because this is a dangerous locality, Miss Merle, and the Danites are known to nightly be in this neighborhood, it being one of their haunts from which they watch the settlers, and I wish to be certain that the Vigilantes have not been driven away by them," was the ready lie.

"Well?"

"The wolf howl tells me that my friends are here; come!"

They rode on once more and presently entered a chasm between two huge rocks, the man leading the way.

But suddenly he turned in his saddle and said, while he came to a halt:

"Miss Merle, I have deceived you, and you are my prisoner."

"Never, sir!" and with a touch of the rein Featherhoof wheeled quickly and darted toward the entrance to the ravine; but a loud call from her captor caused several dark forms to glide down before her.

"Stand aside!" she said, firmly, and seeing that they did not obey, she drew from her pocket a small pistol and leveled it, while she cried fearlessly:

"Over them, Featherhoof!"

The noble horse bounded forward at her words, there was a flash and report, a struggle, curses, and Featherhoof was in the grasp of half a dozen men, while Muriel felt a strong clutch on her arm, and heard at her side, in triumphant tones:

"Miss Merle, as I said before, you are my prisoner; but you have made your *début* into the Danite League by killing one of our number; that pistol, please, which you used so skillfully."

The speaker was Paul Reno, and his grasp upon her arm caused her to relinquish the weapon, while she said, tersely:

"I regret that you were not the one that I shot, sir; but there shall come a day of reckoning for this, Ralph Reno."

"Allow me to disabuse your mind, Miss Merle; I am Paul Reno."

"Ha! now I recognize a difference in your voice, and, oh God! I am in the hands of the Danites," and Muriel reeled as though about to fall from her saddle.

"Yes, Miss Merle, I am Paul Reno, a lieutenant of Jean Leo, the Danite chief, and, escaping to-night from the Vigilantes, I conceived a daring plan to win favor in the eyes of my captain by bringing you with me, and, my striking resemblance to my pious brother has enabled me to successfully carry out my plot, for you are now in my power, thanks to these members of our League, whom I felt confident I would find near here."

Muriel gazed around upon the half-score of men who stood near, and then she shuddered, as her eyes fell upon the prostrate form of the man she had slain.

With his grasp still upon her arm Paul Reno felt her tremble and saw her glance, and he said:

"He is dead, Miss Merle, and by your hand; throw him over from the Devil's Ladder, men, and then let us be on our way."

"But I'll run ther rackets now, pard, seein' as how I has orders from ther chief," and a huge Danite stepped forward and confronted Paul Reno, who angrily asked:

"What do you mean, Carl, the Killer?"

"Jest what I says; Lew Baker is down in the settlement playin' honest, Kennedy went over ther Ladder, at ther crack o' thet Velvet Face's pistol, an', as I has orders ter take you prisoner, I'm ther rankin' officer arter ther chief," was the cool reply of Carl of Colorado.

"Man, you are mad!" angrily replied Paul Reno, dropping his hand upon his revolver.

"Guesses all my pards heur then is mad, for they heerd what Cap'n Leo tole me."

"Men, has this fellow orders to make me a prisoner?" and Paul Reno faced those before him.

"He has, sir," replied one, politely.

"Why? What have I done?"

"You jest git ther cap'n ter answer thet conundrum, pard Reno; but he sent us heur ter fetch you back, an' we intends ter do it, an' it's my opinion thet there'll be a high-toned funeral in ther League, an' you'll be ther corpse, for it's said as how you shot at ther cap'n."

"It is an infamous lie!" shouted Paul Reno.

"It is the truth, men, as I will swear to your chief; ha! ha! ha! Paul Reno, there are a pair of us in trouble," and there was a tone of triumph in Muriel's voice that sunk deep into the heart of Paul Reno, and he moved forward, as though to silence her scornful laughter; but instantly he was seized by Carl of Colorado and his comrades, and ten minutes after the party were mounted and slowly descending the Devil's Ladder, Featherhoof tremblingly obeying the command of his mistress to make the perilous descent.

But in spite of her own peril, Muriel Merle rejoiced in the fact that Paul Reno, who was securely bound to the horse that slowly followed Featherhoof, had been caught in his own trap.

CHAPTER XXVI.

THE TWO PRISONERS.

It was a long, dreary, fatiguing ride for poor Muriel, over mountains and through valleys, on that night of her capture; but hers was a brave spirit, and she did not despair of succor, for she felt assured that Velvet Face and the miners would soon learn of her capture and pursue her captors to the bitter end.

Of the Danite League, in whose power she was, she had heard strange stories, of how they were sworn to obey the commands of the Mormon Prophet, and to smite and slay all who came into that fair land who were not of their faith.

In spite of the dread of the League brave men had made a home in one of the loveliest valleys in the heart of the mountains, and from out the generous earth were daily digging fortunes of yellow metal, which the Mormons felt should belong only to men of their creed.

Against these then was the Danite vengeance turned, and Muriel knew that often a mysterious murder was committed in the mining camps, the only solution of which was that some Mormon spy in the camps had done the deed.

And more, now and then one of the loveliest of the valley's fair daughters would disappear mysteriously, and at length the secret would come out that she had been stolen from her home and carried away to become a Mormon's bride.

Where the haunts of the Danite League were none seemed to know who did not belong to the band, and it was into the power of such men that Muriel had fallen, and well she knew what her fate would be, if she did not escape from them, and escape seemed impossible.

But she kept up her courage, for once before she had been in their power, and, single-handed, Velvet Face had rescued her.

And, in spite of her sorrow, she found some comfort in looking into the face of the man who rode by her side, his arms bound behind him, and his feet securely fastened beneath his horse.

Silent, stern and upright he rode along, with Muriel on his left and the members of the band behind and before him, and none of them ever speaking, until the silence seemed to become unendurable to the fair captive, and, as she glanced toward him, Paul Reno said:

"I suppose you know what your fate is to be?"

"Yes."

"What?"

"Death!"

"You surprise me."

"I mean it."

"But you will not be slain."

"I will take my own life."

"You will not be such a fool, brave as you are, girl."

"You will see," was the firm reply of Muriel.

"You mean you prefer death to becoming the bride of the Mormon chief?"

"Yes."

"He is a good man to his wives."

"So is a tiger to its mate."

"He will honor you as your beauty deserves."

"I tell you I shall never be a Mormon's wife."

"We shall see."

"So be it, Paul Reno; but before I am I have an idea that I will see you shot."

The man winced, and then asked:

"Why should I be shot?"

"Why are you now a prisoner?"

"There is some mistake."

"There will be none about their killing you."

"You draw a pleasant picture, Miss Merle."

"I am glad that you like it; but I have heard enough about this Danite League, of which you are a member, to feel assured that they will punish your treachery with death, Paul Reno."

"Jean Leo will not kill me, without proof that I was a traitor."

"But he shall have proof."

"What proof?"

"I will tell him that it was you that attempted his life, and that the act nearly cost your brother his life."

"And you think he will believe you?"

"Why not? A man who lives upon a volcano, as he does, must needs doubt all around him, and he will be assured that what he only suspects now, was the truth, when I tell him all I know."

"And you will do this?"

"I certainly will."

"You will have my life on your soul, my blood on your hands!"

"I have one Danite's blood upon my hands, and it doesn't trouble me," was the bold reply, although it was a great effort for Muriel to suppress the shudder at the remembrance of the form she had seen fall at her shot, and then thrown over the cliff by his comrades.

"You are a strange woman; just such a one as, had I met you years ago, could have kept me from crime, and made my life a far different one," said Paul Reno, with a sigh.

"I regret that I have met you so late in life even," was Muriel's provoking reply.

The man felt the shot, but remained silent for awhile, and then he said, lowering his voice, so as not to be heard by his comrades:

"Let us declare a truce between us."

"Well?"

"Aid me, and I will help you to escape from these fellows."

"How, pray?"

"I am bound, as you see; when next we come to a narrow path ride close to me, and free my arms with my knife, which you can draw from my belt."

"Then, at a place ahead, which I know well, I will give the word and you can wheel into a ravine and I will shoot the men nearest to me, and follow, for you know they did not take my weapons from my belt."

"Well?" said Muriel, quietly.

"The ravine is narrow, and the others cannot immediately follow, as they will be taken by surprise, and that horse of yours, and the one I ride, are both far faster than the others, which are merely mountain ponies, and then we are free."

"To go where, for you dare not return to Paradise Valley."

"True; but we can go elsewhere; yes, far from here, and my whole life shall be devoted to you, for, fair girl, I love you with my whole heart," and the man spoke in impassioned tones; but in terse, cutting tones came the answer:

"This is a love-scene under difficulties, Paul Reno; no, I prefer to put up with the ills I now bear than fly to others I know not of."

A muttered curse was the only response of the thwarted man, who once more rode on in grim silence.

CHAPTER XXVII.

THE DANITES' RETREAT.

The gray light of dawn was creeping above the mountain tops, as the small cavalcade turned into a canyon that was little more than a split in a hill, for it was a chasm of twenty feet in width, and with rocky precipices rising high on either side.

A ride of a quarter of a mile through this chasm and a path turned to the right, and along a narrow shelf, strangely like the Devil's Ladder, the Danites held their way in single file, their fair captive following in silence and seemingly without fear, and Paul Reno stern,

savage and revengeful immediately behind her.

Up the narrow ledge the sure footed animals climbed for several hundred yards, and then came a sharp turn, which the morning light showed was a spot fraught with great danger to pass safely around; but the Danites quickly dismounted, by slipping over the hind-quarters of their horses, and the sagacious beasts slowly passed safely around the curve, until it came Featherhoof's turn, and in spite of the risk, Muriel slipped to the ground, refusing the proffered aid of Carl the Killer.

"Now, Featherhoof, show that even Danite steeds cannot lead where you will not follow," said Muriel, and her faithful horse obeyed, passing around the narrow bend in the cliff in safety.

"I will ride around it," said Paul Reno, gruffly.

"No, you might take that way o' dyin', pard, seein' as yer know the Death Cavern are so awful near; guess we'll see thet yer don't suicide yerself ef we knows it," remarked Carl the Killer, and the savage prisoner was raised from his horse and carried around the curve, while his horse was led.

Once past the barrier, and Muriel saw that the ledge path led directly into the mouth of a cavern, large enough for a horseman to enter.

"It's a pretty peert distance, yit, miss, so you'd better take yer saddle ag'in," said Carl, with an attempt at politeness.

"I prefer to walk, for I am tired of riding," Muriel replied.

"Thet may be, miss, but I prefer yer ter ride; it's more safer."

The maiden saw that resistance was useless and she called Featherhoof alongside of a rock and again mounted, once more refusing the leader's proffered aid, and which caused him to say, sullenly:

"Yer seems awful skittish o' my touchin' yer."

"Yes; I have the same abhorrence to you that I feel for a snake," was the bold response, and once more in her saddle, she followed the Danites on their way through the cavern.

As it grew darker and darker, two men dropped back alongside of Featherhoof, and once more Muriel's hope of escape was thwarted, and in a little while it grew light in the cavern again, and the maiden looked around her with awe at the vast space that she was in beneath the mountain.

Above her the ceilings arose to considerable height, and upon all sides were rocky vaults and chambers, that made the interior of the cavern look like some vast cathedral.

But the horses of the Danites held on their way, and some ten minutes after entering the cavern, the party drew rein in a vaulted chamber, one side of which was open and looked out upon a small, but pleasant vale, in which were a number of horses picketed out to feed upon the rich grass.

Under trees near by were hammocks swung, and most of them had occupants, for the sun was just rising; but a few men were around the fires evidently preparing their morning meal.

Upon these men Muriel glanced with surprise, for they wore black masks that wholly hid their faces, and turning to her captors, to make some comment upon the subject, she fairly started, for in the darkness of the cavern they, too had put on the somber, close-fitting face-covering that the Danite League were wont to wear upon all occasions, and even the countenance of Paul Reno had been covered by some of his comrades, for he was still bound.

"What means this general masquerade, may I ask?" inquired Muriel of the man nearest to her.

"A law of our League, miss, causes us to mask with the sunrise," answered a man, with politeness.

"And you unmask with the sunset, do you?"

"That is as suits our leader's fancy; sometimes we go days with our faces covered," and the speaker rode away at the command of Carl the Killer, to tell the Chief of the League that the scouts from the Paradise Valley had returned with captives, and they awaited him in the cavern.

Muriel watched the messenger and saw him approach a gayly-colored serape swinging between two spruce trees, and instantly a man sprung out.

At a glance Muriel observed that it was the same one she had seen once before, the man who had captured her the day of the train's arrival at Paradise Valley.

"Ah! he, too, wears the black mask," she muttered, as the man came toward her at a quick walk.

"Ah, lady, we meet again, I am happy to say, and unexpectedly so, I assure you," he said, in a pleasant way, as he came near, and he raised his broad sombrero partly, and then called to one of his men:

"Realez, send Luel here."

The man disappeared, and the leader turned to Paul Reno, and fixing his piercing eyes upon him, said:

"Well, Lieutenant Reno, you have returned to the Death Cavern, have you?"

"Yes, chief, I have brought you the fair lady you coveted," was the reply.

"And yet I find you in bonds?"

"Carl says it was your orders, chief."

"True; I heard that which caused me to look upon you as a traitor to me, and I thought it best that you should die rather than I."

"I do not understand, chief."

"My lieutenant, Lew Baker, sent me word that you, not some one else, had fired that shot at me which so nearly cost me my life; see, here is where the bullet struck, and the shock stunned me, but my good horse Charcoal brought me to our retreat."

"Chief, Lew Baker wishes to displace me to gain favor in your eyes; it was a Chinaman that fired that shot," said Reno.

"He speaks falsely, sir; poor Chinese Washee would not harm any one; it was your lieutenant, Paul Reno, that tried to kill you," said Muriel, with fearless frankness.

Again the broad sombrero was raised, and the chief said:

"Miss Merle, I thank you; upon your testimony shall Paul Reno suffer condemnation—Ah! here is Luel, and as you must feel fatigued after your long ride, she will look to your comfort."

As the chief spoke there approached a dark-faced woman, dressed in half-Indian, half-Mexican attire, and evidently a native of the latter country.

"Luel, see that this lady has every attention that will add to her comfort; but remember, she is a captive."

"I understand, señor chief; come, señorita, I am your slave," answered the woman, and lightly springing to the ground, Muriel was only too glad to follow her into some recess in the cavern, the chief touching his sombrero as she passed, and saying:

"I will see Miss Merle when she has rested, for I would question her as to her knowledge of my lieutenant's treachery, as upon her words hangs life or death to Paul Reno."

Muriel shuddered, for there was a fearful foreboding in the tone of the chief, and after a short walk along a rocky aisle of the cavern, the woman, Luel, halted in a large chamber, that seemed almost built by the hands of men, instead of being formed by one of Nature's freaks.

It was roomy, dry, and possessed a large arched opening, overlooking the vale, that served as a window, and in it was some rude furniture of a rustic kind, with a cot of soft skins, a table and some culinary utensils.

"Here, señorita, this is the guest's chamber, and in all that I can do for you command me," said Luel, and not unkindly.

"It is my prison, I suppose," said Muriel, with a sigh.

"For a while only, señorita."

"And then—?" asked Muriel, touched by the woman's strange manner.

"And then to you worse than death," was the low, sad reply of Luel the Mexican.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

THE DEATH-CAVERN.

FATIGUED with her long ride, after partaking of a most palatable breakfast brought her by Luel, Muriel sought rest on the comfortable cot of skins, and was soon sleeping soundly, for, though she knew well what her fate would be, she did not despair until all hope of escape had left her.

It was late in the afternoon when she awoke, and once more she found her attentive guard, for Luel was nothing more than her jailer, ready with food for her.

"The chief desires to see the señorita when it suits her convenience," said the Mexican woman.

"Very well; one time is as good as another: will he come here, or shall I go to him?" was the indifferent reply.

"He begs that you come there, as the Señor Reno is to be tried for treachery toward the League."

"Very well, show me the way," responded Muriel, anxious to get an opportunity to the better study the geography of her surroundings, for, refreshed by her rest, her mind now turned wholly upon escape.

The Mexican woman led the way out of the cave-chamber, along an aisle, or tunnel, that penetrated into the depths of the mountain, where it ended in another vast, cathedral-like cavern, where crystal pendants glittered like diamonds, in the light of a score of bright torches.

Momentarily, as Muriel stepped within the vaulted chamber, she hesitated with dread, for a startling view met her gaze.

The rocky chamber was of immense size, and the ceiling was a vast dome that glimmered like burnished gold; but in the vast rotunda stood over a hundred men, all clad in black, and wearing over their faces the mask their secret order demanded.

At one end was a rock, covered with bearskins, and upon this sat a form that Muriel recognized as the chief, while upon either side

of him stood ten somber-clothed and masked torch-bearers, and fronting them were the members of the band who were simply spectators.

Rising as Muriel approached, the chief led her to a seat on the rock near him, while Luel drew back out of sight.

"Bring in the prisoner!" came the stern order then, and the next moment three men entered, the center one being Paul Reno, as Muriel saw, for he alone was unmasked beside herself.

"Paul Reno, you are accused of being a traitor to the Danite League; what have you to say to refute such a charge?" said the chief, sternly.

"I say it is false," was the quick reply.

"Here in my hand," resumed the chief, "I have a letter sent me from Lew Baker, my second lieutenant, and on secret duty in Paradise Valley, telling me that your twin brother was tried for the supposed death of a mysterious man who roves the plains and mountains at will."

"On the night we met in the Paradise Valley, near the home of Mr. Malcolm Merle, you remember we had words regarding the possession of the fair lady who now confronts you, you claiming her against the wishes of our Prophet."

"We then parted, and immediately after I was shot at from behind, and I hoped to believe the intended assassin was one of two persons whom we noticed near; but Baker's report says that I, in my dress, and riding a black horse was believed to be this Velvet Face, the Border Bravo, while you were considered to be Ralph Reno, and the witnesses testified that you fired the shot."

"It is false!" again said the treacherous Danite.

"Fortunately you brought with you one who can testify as to the truth or falsity of the deed on your part, and your motive in bringing her here was to save your own life, for you knew that your treachery toward your chief had been discovered; now, Miss Merle, will you make known to this assemblage just what was proven against this man?" and the chief turned to Muriel, who cast one quick glance over the silent men, with their masked faces before her, and then bent her gaze upon Paul Reno.

The look of pleading she saw there at first touched her heart to pity; but when she recalled that the man before her had sent his brother to prison for a forgery he had committed, and had then taken the life of his own father, and flying West for refuge had become a Danite, and stolen her from her own home, her bosom felt no mercy for him, and she said in a frank way and in a tone that reached every ear:

"I will say that Paul Reno on that night to which you refer, was believed to be his brother Ralph, as you were thought to be Velvet Face, and that the prisoner was seen by two witnesses to fire at you as soon as your back was turned, and it was believed the shot was fatal."

"And more, had not Velvet Face arrived when he did, bringing this man a prisoner, Ralph Reno would have suffered death as an assassin."

"Your testimony is sufficient, Miss Merle; your words have but proven the charge of Lew Baker against him, and he must die."

"Jean Leo, I implore your mercy," cried the doomed man, dropping upon his knees before the chief, while Muriel started back, as he spoke the name of the man at her side, and said in a half whisper:

"Are you Jean Leo, the Danite?"

"So men call me, Miss Merle."

"Then I envy that man his fate," was the outspoken response.

"I think you will not when you see what his fate is to be, for to be a traitor to our League, Miss Merle, the punishment is more than death."

"Worse than death?" she asked, in an alarmed kind of way.

"Yes; you shall see," and in a loud, stern voice he commanded:

"Executioners, bring on your casket!"

"Mercy! oh, mercy, chief!" cried the condemned man, but though Muriel heard his piteous pleading she saw not his agonized face, as her gaze was riveted upon four men approaching, and bearing something between them.

With a shudder she saw that it was a coffin made of iron, and on the lid was fastened the skull and cross-bones of some unfortunate.

The coffin was painted jet-black on the outside and blood-red on the inside, and was sufficiently large to contain a man far above the average size.

"Paul Reno, you have just five minutes to breathe the fresh air of life; if you have aught to say, speak!"

"I beg you mercy, Jean Leo, as you hope for mercy."

"It is useless, as you know; our League knows no mercy, and our laws admit of none; your coffin is at your feet, and already has it been the recipient of other traitor Danites."

"Executioners, seize the traitor and place him in the casket, and seal it with the Danite's seal of justice."

"Great God! do you mean to bury him alive?"

The cry came from Muriel, for up to that instant she had believed the prisoner was to be

shot or hanged; but when she knew what was his awful doom she turned pallid and trembled like an aspen-leaf.

"You have heard his doom; no earthly power can reverse it," was the stern reply, and Jean Leo arose and gazed upon the struggling man who was writhing in the grasp of four powerful men.

But his struggles, fierce as they were, were of no avail; he was securely bound, placed in his coffin and the lid screwed down.

"Now for the burial rites!" came in the same deeply-impressive tones of the chief, and the rock was rolled away, upon which he and Muriel had been seated, and a grave-like cavity beneath was revealed.

Instantly the coffin was lowered into the grave, the heavy rock was shoved back over it, and the cries of the victim were smothered, while the torch-bearers marched around the tomb, chanting a weird song that sent back thundering echoes through the canyon.

"Come, Miss Merle, I will see you back to your rock-chamber, and to-morrow night we start for the city of our people," and Jean Leo turned to where he had last seen Muriel; but a cry of rage broke from his lips, for she had gone.

CHAPTER XXIX.

A ROCK OF REFUGE.

THOUGH almost paralyzed with horror at the scene before her, Muriel Merle did not lose her presence of mind; but, sickened at the burial alive of a human being, by men who were his comrades, she shrunk back from sight and sunk down upon the bear-skins, which had been removed from the rock and thrown one side.

But hardly had she been there an instant, when she felt something fall upon her, and, starting up, she saw that it was one of the long black gowns and the mask worn by an executioner, and which, in his fierce struggling, Paul Reno had torn from him.

A cry of joy almost broke from her lips as she seized them, and seeing that every Danite present was eagerly watching the placing of the doomed man in the coffin, she arose silently and crept out of sight.

Once out of the glare of the torches and she ran like a deer along a dimly lighted aisle, and not knowing or caring which way she went so that she could hide from her fearful foes, she continued on her way, until, at last, in the dim obscurity of the cavern, she found a huge boulder, which seemed to have dropped in the aisle from the vaulted roof above.

The sides were rough, the top broad, and here was a hope of escape from the Argus-eyed Danites.

With a great effort, and after twice slipping back, she managed to reach the top, and, to her joy, found that it was hollowed out, so that it formed a kind of nest for her to hide in.

Struggling down from the high roof, through crevices in the rocks, came a few faint rays of light, and enabled her to see that she was safe from discovery, unless some most inquisitive Danite thought of looking on the top of her place of refuge.

With her riding-habit and the gown she had taken, she made herself passably comfortable, and then cuddled down to await the result, for she felt that she would soon be pursued.

"It is a desperate chance, but I'll take it, and accidentally I may find the mouth of the cavern by which I entered— Ha, I hear voices, and there is the flicker of lights," and she crouched closer down in her retreat.

Nearer and nearer came the flickering lights, and louder and louder resounded the voices, and soon a score of men came in sight, all of them bearing pine torches, and carefully searching every crevice of the aisle as they came along.

"I'm sure the chief was wrong about her coming this way, as accident only could have caused her to enter this passage, but we'll search it thoroughly," said a voice.

"And then which way, Buck?" asked another.

"We'll go back and take the right passage to the cavern entrance; if she took that, she gained the valley, and those who went on horseback will overhaul her."

"Guess not, for she can hear their horses' hoofs and hide; I tell you she's a game one, for I was with the chief the day he captured her near the Paradise Valley, and she didn't scare worth a cent; what was it, the chief told you, Buck?"

"To fetch her back, dead or alive, for she holds the secret of the Death Cavern, now, and knows how to get here; well, a bird couldn't have hid from us here," and the speakers passed out of hearing, still diligently searching as they went.

During their passing the rock Muriel had scarcely dared breathe, and once, as a man struck his torch against her hiding-place, she almost lost consciousness; but the next moment they passed on, and a sigh of deepest relief broke from her heart.

Yet still she remained quietly in her retreat,

and waiting, soon saw the flickering lights returning, and once more she heard the words of the searchers:

"She's not in this passage, that's certain, Buck."

"No, she's taken some of the other aisles, and the other search-bands will pick her up; but we'll follow the passage to the cavern mouth before we return, and I'll leave Sandy there as a guard."

"Waal, who are I ter let go out, or come in, I'd like ter know?"

But before an answer could be given a hoarse voice back in the shadow hailed:

"Is that you, Buck?"

"Yes."

"Waal, hev yer found ther critter?"

"No," and, as the man addressed as Buck replied, the tall form and cruel face of Carl the Killer came in sight, and halting within ten feet of the rock upon which Muriel lay concealed, he said:

"I has orders ter tell yer ter hunt all night, and I takes ther cavern entrance until midnight Sunday night, an' ef ther gal don't turn up then, she's tumbled into some o' the holes, or jumped in from her skeer at Paul's burial sarvices in ther trial chamber."

"Then you are to be guard at the entrance, lieutenant?"

"I are, and you is ter fetch me my grub fer ther time stated—twelve o'clock Sunday night; now s'arch well an' find tner gal, fer I hain't fond o' standin' guard."

The men now moved slowly away, and Carl the Killer went on to his post, while Muriel said in a voice of almost despair:

"Until Sunday night, and this is Thursday—oh, the light has gone from the crevices, night has fallen, and I am alone, all alone in this horrible spot."

She buried her face in her hands and was almost overcome with grief; but at last she went to sleep, and when she awoke there was a ray of sunlight falling through the crevice above her, and she said joyfully:

"One night gone already! oh, if I only could sleep the long and dreary hours away I would be content."

Her limbs were cramped, and bearing no sound in the cavern she slipped down from her perch and took a walk down the rocky passage until she came to one that was lighter, and which crossed the one in which she had sought refuge.

Glancing at the stone flooring she saw that it was marked with iron hoots, and she felt a pang of joy, for she knew that it led to the outer entrance.

Returning to her retreat once more, she found that her little walk had given her an appetite, for she had a craving for food; but she knew she must conquer the pangs of hunger, and again she sought repose.

All through the day she slept and lay awake in turns, and when darkness came, she determined to discover if the other passageway did really lead to the cavern entrance.

Coming down off her place of refuge, she felt her way along the halls until she came to the other aisle, and then her every step was taken with the utmost caution, for she remembered what she had heard about the holes, or pits, into which she had been supposed to have fallen, or sprung in her despair and fright.

Slowly and cautiously she went along until after what seemed hours to her, she saw a dim light ahead.

Silently she went on, and then the huge opening to the cavern came before her eyes, for she saw the star-gemmed skies beyond.

But then she paused, for, pacing to and fro, and strongly relieved against the star-lit heavens, was the massive form of Carl the Killer.

"I know my way out, when Sunday night comes," she said, hoarsely, and slowly she retraced her way, and once more, though the darkness was almost tangible, found her rock of refuge, and, prostrated by her daring undertaking, sunk into a deep sleep, from which she did not awaken until the sun again rode high in the heavens.

"Saturday this is, and to-morrow will be Sunday—and then—"

She said no more, for she dared not give utterance to her thoughts.

CHAPTER XXX.

TRAILED TO DOOM.

"EF I finds that gal ther chief will make me rich with gold-dust, an' I'll go up ter Mormon City fer a time, I'm thinking."

The voice of a man within a few feet of her caused Muriel to awake with a start, and her eyes were blinded by the glare of a torch in them; but, with remarkable presence of mind, she restrained the cry that arose to her lips, and lay quiet and trembling, though she recognized who the speaker was, as he went on with his self-communing.

"I hes a idee that Buck failed ter look inter one place, an' as it are now arter twelve o'clock Sunday night, an' my duty as guard are over with, I'll jist s'arch this heur rock on my way back, for I remembers standin' up in my

saddle one time an' findin' a snug leetle nest on top."

Again Muriel started; but still her nerve did not forsake her, and into the pocket of her riding-habit she thrust her hand and drew forth a small pistol, while upon her face was a look of stern determination, as revealed by the torch Carl the Killer held in his hand.

"I'll jist stick this heur firebrand in this leetle hole, an' crawl up an' see ef I don't find suthin' on this rock, as I dreamt I did," and, as the huge Danite spoke he placed his foot on the rough edge of the rock.

But there he paused, for there suddenly came to his ears a sound that caused him to say in a tone of alarm:

"What in thunder! hes ther chief turned them durned bloodhounds loose on ther scent?"

"Fire an' furies! they is on my trail, an' 'll tear me ter pieces," he cried, in alarm, and he made a spring to scramble up the rock; but, as he clung there with both hands, his eyes nearly started from their sockets, for the muzzle of a pistol looked him squarely in the face, and a woman's voice, but as firm as a clarion note, said:

"Drop back, sir, or I will kill you!"

"Thunder, gal, I hes found yer, hes I?" he cried.

"Yes, and the bloodhounds have found you; see there!"

He glanced back over his shoulder, and fearing the two huge brutes rushing upon him more than the pistol, he made a gigantic effort to scramble upon the rock, and, in sheer mercy for him, Muriel refrained from firing.

But, with a huge bound one of the bloodhounds seized his leg, and he was dragged back to his doom.

Then followed piteous, smothered shrieks, savage growls, and then several pistol-shots in rapid succession, with yelps of pain, whines, a groan or two, and silence reigned, while Muriel Merle dropped back into her retreat, crying:

"They have killed him; but I could not fire sooner— Ah! some one is coming."

Down closer she now crouched, for hurrying feet were heard, and soon a dozen men came in view, and at their head was Jean Leo, whose face was still masked.

"Great God! it is Carl the Killer!" came from his lips.

"And he are dead meat, cap'n," said one, bending over him.

"Yes, I had forgotten when I turned those dogs loose that he was on guard at the entrance; they have tracked him here, and he tried to climb upon this rock, when they dragged him back."

"Pity he didn't use his shootin'-iron quicker."

"Yes; but I suppose he did not wish to hurt the hounds if he could keep them off, and the fierce brutes mastered him, and he shot too late to save himself; but I would rather have lost a dozen men than these brutes, for they cannot be replaced."

"What's ter be done, cap'n?"

"Carry the bodies to the camp and bury them, and then give up search for the girl, for she's either dead from starvation, fallen into some one of the pits in the darkness, or escaped from the cavern that night of her flight, and that is hard to believe."

Breathlessly Muriel listened to all that was said, and then her heart beat high with joy, as she saw Jean Leo and his Danites move slowly away.

Until the last sound died away, she remained in her retreat, and then she slowly arose, and, with a great effort reached the rocky flooring, for she was weak from the loss of food, and fearfully cramped from her bent-up position on the rock.

At first she could hardly walk, but her limbs becoming more supple with exercise, she crept along the side of the passage, and reaching the other aisle leading to the cavern entrance, she turned into it.

At last the light was visible ahead, and the welcome stars met her gaze.

Here she paused, looking to see if any one else had been stationed on guard at the mouth of the cave.

No one was visible, and with a heart full of hope, and returning strength, as she breathed the pure air, in spite of her long fasting, she moved on more quickly, and soon stood in the very mouth of the cavern.

"Thank God!" broke from her lips aloud, and the words were hardly spoken before repented of, for up from behind a rock suddenly came a tall form, and in a joyful tone he cried:

"It's the girl, as I live; now, Buck, to win your lieutenantancy."

With the spring of a tiger he was upon her, unmindful of her thrusting her hand forward with a pistol in it, which she well knew held not a single load, and reeling in despair at being again in the power of the Danites, Muriel felt herself becoming unconscious, when, before her blurred vision a tall form suddenly bounded, and she caught the gleam of steel, and heard the cutting, crunching sound as the metal met bone and flesh.

One glance, and Muriel Merle recognized who it was that had come to her rescue, and she

swooned away, but was caught in his strong arms, and borne rapidly down the narrow ledge that led to the vale below.

CHAPTER XXXI. FOUND AND LOST.

WHEN Velvet Face left Sunset Retreat, the night following the day of Ralph Reno's second rescue from death, he was accompanied by two companions the reader will remember, one of whom was the Guide himself, and the other Oll the Waif.

Ascending the mountain, they took the road leading to the Devil's Ladder, and at a late hour arrived in Echo Canyon, where they were joined by the Bannocks, Blue Snake and Red Dove, both of whom were on foot, for they seemed to prefer trusting to their own speed and endurance than to horse-flesh.

"My friends, what we have to do now has to be done quickly, and with caution, for the Danite League is very powerful, and we cannot accomplish anything by force; now, our first duty is to find out if Miss Merle is in the secret haunt of the Danites, or if she has already been taken to the Mormon city.

"If the former, Oll, here, will aid us greatly, for he knows well the haunts of the League; if the latter, we must hasten to the city and see what can be done to get her out of their power," and the party, when Velvet Face ceased speaking, moved on through the canyon in the direction of the Death Cavern, the locality of which was known to the youth, Oll, although scouts had in vain sought to find the stronghold, so cleverly had Nature concealed all the advances to it.

Though the horsemen moved rapidly along, the Indians kept pace with them, and just at dawn they reached a secluded ravine, where Oll the Waif said it was best to hide for the day, and from which the Death Cavern was but a mile distant.

Seeking safe hiding-places among the rocks the party sought rest, and the shadows of night had fallen upon the valley before they moved from their retreat.

Still acting as guide Oll led them to the ravine, where the ledge of the rocky cliff began, and here bid them wait, while he went on to see if the cavern entrance was unguarded.

"I will go with you, Oll," said Velvet Face, and leaving their horses in the care of the others, they moved cautiously up the steep path, and at last came in view of the cavern entrance, by peering around the bend of the ledge.

But, to their regret, they saw the tall form of a man standing there, and they knew not how many more were within the shadow of the cavern.

"It is not usual for them to place a guard here, as they little fear attack," whispered Oll.

"Well, he's there, and in some way we must get rid of him; I could kill him with a shot," said Velvet Face.

"And the report would resound through the cavern like thunder and alarm the men in the valley beyond."

"True, and there may be others near, and it would spoil all our plans; we must gain entrance to the cavern without alarming the guard; but how to do it, is the question."

"He may drop to sleep after a while."

"Yes, and we will wait and see."

And as patiently as Indians will wait to entrap a foe they waited, until presently another form appeared in the cavern entrance, and bearing a torch in his hand.

"It's midnight, pard, an' ther boys sent me ter relieve yer on yer beat, as they wants yer to jine a little gambin' game," said the newcomer, and his words were distinctly heard by Velvet Face and the Waif.

"Waal, I has had a long beat of it; but ther cap'n knows I never goes asleep on dooty; but the time's up, an' ther's no use o' yer stayin'."

"The boys says I'd better stick it out until daybreak, an' by thet time ther gal will be dead o' starvation."

"Waal, I'll take yer torch, Sandy, and go ter camp," and Carl the Killer left, and the newcomer took his place.

For awhile the guard seemed to be wide awake; but at length he leant up against the rocky cliff and became drowsy, and overcome with sleep he threw his blanket down behind a boulder and lay down upon it to catch a nap.

Hardly had slumber deadened his senses, when Velvet Face and Oll, who were about to move out from their place behind the rocky point, started back quickly, for a form appeared in the cavern entrance.

It was Muriel, and the cry of thankfulness that broke from her lips aroused the guard, and he seized her in his arms, to the next instant sink dead in his track, for the keen blade of Velvet Face had pierced his heart.

"Come, Oll, now for a run," cried the Border Bravo, as he raised Muriel in his arms and sped down the narrow ledge with the speed of a deer, and the sure-footedness of a mountain sheep.

A rapid run of ten minutes, and he reached the valley below, where Ralph Reno and the Indians awaited him, and with great anxiety, at his long stay.

"Savel you have saved her!" cried Ralph

Reno, with a pang of jealousy piercing his heart, to feel that Velvet Face had rescued the beautiful girl.

"No, she saved herself; we saw her come out of the cavern, and she has fainted," replied Velvet Face, and he placed to her lips his flask of brandy, while Red Dove moistened her face and hands with water from a rivulet near by.

"Where am I?" suddenly cried Muriel, opening her eyes, and half-springing up.

"Safe, and with friends," was the low reply of Velvet Face.

"Thank God!" came from the pallid lips.

"But you must rouse yourself, Miss Merle, for we have a long way to go, and pursuers may even now be on our track," said the Border Bravo, firmly, and his words did arouse Muriel, for she shook off the feeling of lethargy that was creeping over her, and said quickly:

"I am ready, sir; oh, how kind it was of you to come, and you, too, Mr. Reno— Oh Heaven!" and she shudderingly covered her face with her hands, as she remembered the fate of the wicked brother of the man before her.

"You are ill, I fear: here, Reno, mount and let me aid Miss Merle to a seat behind you, and we will be off; but where is Oll?"

"He did not return with you," said Ralph Reno.

"Did not return with me? Why, he certainly started after me; there is something wrong, and I will not desert the brave boy."

"Here, Reno, aid Miss Merle to Oll's saddle, and he can ride back behind me; now go, for time is precious, and you, my friends, had better return with them."

"No," answered Blue Snake, to whom Velvet Face had spoken; "the Valley Lily safe; we wait for you."

"Yes, for I can easily reach the valley now," responded Ralph Reno, and Muriel having been safely mounted upon Oll's horse, Gipsy, the two rode away, the man seemingly lost in deep thought, the maiden appearing like one dazed by what she had passed through.

But after a while Muriel again shook off the numbing sensation that held her, and from her lips Ralph Reno heard the bitter story of her capture, her imprisonment, the testimony she had given against his erring brother, and then that brother's awful fate.

The strong man shuddered visibly as he listened to her story, and she heard his teeth grit together savagely, to repress the cry that arose in his throat, at the fearful doom of him in whose veins flowed the same blood as his own, and whose life had been one long sin, but yet not deserving, in spite of his crimes, an end which nothing could surpass in horror.

And, from that burial of a living being, Muriel went on to tell of her escape, flight in the cavern isles, and her finding the rock of refuge at last, where for days and nights she had lived in dread, and finally witnessed another scene of horror enough to madden her brain.

"Thank God your sorrows are over now, for there lies the valley beneath us," said Ralph Reno, and Muriel fairly started at the hoarse voice that addressed her, and gazing upon the man who rode by her side, a cry of alarm escaped her lips, for in the light of early dawn she beheld a face that had grown ashen in hue and strangely haggard, while his hair, hanging in wavy masses about his shoulders, had turned as white as snow.

A few hours of mental agony for the fate of the brother who had so wronged him, and of horror and sympathy at the sufferings of her he idolized, had made him in appearance an old man, long years before he had crossed the threshold of middle age.

CHAPTER XXXII.

MAD MYRA'S PLOT.

AS Oll, the Waif, started to follow Velvet Face in his flight, out of a niche in the side of the cliff suddenly sprang a slender form, and a revolver muzzle was thrust full in his face, while a voice that was firm and distinct said:

"Move or cry out and you die!"

Oll saw his danger, and not a word escaped his lips, while Velvet Face sped on with his fair burden; but he turned his eyes toward his captor and said, quickly:

"Mad Myra!"

"Yes, I am Mad Myra, as men call me because I live alone and away from them, and you are Oll, the Waif," was the reply, as the woman returned her weapon to her belt.

"Yes, men call me Oll, the Waif, for I have no home," was the sad reply.

"Why not return to the Mormon city and become the—"

"Ha! you know me?" cried the youth.

"Yes, I know you, Oll, the Waif, and I know why you hide in the Paradise Valley."

The youth bowed his head and remained silent for a moment, and then said in a low tone:

"Who are you, strange woman?"

"I am one who, like you, have known sorrow; one who hides like a hunted hare among rocks and mountains, rather than be as a princess among men; I am one who bides her time to make things even, take it ever so long."

Oll gazed fixedly into the woman's face, and by the bright starlight he seemed to recall her features to memory, for he said, slowly:

"I know you now; you were the favored bride of—"

"Hold! it matters not who I am, or what I was, for there is work for us to do; so tell me, do you know well the Death Cavern?"

"Yes."

"And the place where Jean Leo dwells?"

"Yes."

"You dwelt there once?"

"Yes."

"As his—"

"No! no! no! I served another, not him," was the quick reply.

"And that other?"

"Has played me doubly false."

"Revenge is sweet," was the laconic response of Mad Myra.

"Yes."

"I need not ask you why you came here, for I saw that it was to rescue that beautiful girl from the power of a devil; but now that you are here will you aid me?"

"In what way?"

"Revenge!"

The woman spoke the word with such intensity of passion that the youth started; but he asked, calmly:

"Against whom?"

"Jean Leo."

"Ah! you hate him?"

"As Satan hates Heaven!" was the savage reply.

"How can I aid you?"

"You have said that you know the Death Cavern?"

"I do."

"Would you fear to face him?"

"If recognized, my life would be the forfeit."

"You will not be recognized."

"I do not fear it from him, but from one other."

"Take the risk; listen, here is a letter from one of Jean Leo's agents; I took it from him after he died by the roadside, where I found him dying, having been mortally wounded in a fight with a bear."

"This man was on his way to the Death Cavern to seek Jean Leo, and make known to him that a train of seven wagons was on its way to Paradise Valley, where they were to become settlers, and among them were intended victims for the Mormons."

"Now, by this letter, you will see that Danite Dick, the writer and Jean Leo's agent, is ill in one of the wagons, and will be carried on into the valley, where no one suspects him, and he sent Rocky Mountain Ike, the man whom the bear killed, and his ally, on to the Death Cavern, to ask the chief to go to Purgatory City in disguise and see him, and receive from him the important tidings he has brought him from the States."

"But will Jean Leo go?"

"Yes, he will risk anything, if disguised; now you are to tell him that you came across Rocky Mountain Ike dying, and he gave you this letter, and told you how to find the cavern; and I will give you a disguise that will keep any curious eye from knowing you as Oll the Waif, while, with your acquaintance with the cavern, and the Danites' mode of life, and laws, you can pass yourself as a youth from Mormon City going to Paradise Valley in the hope of being able to dig a fortune out of the mines."

"And what then?"

"Tell Jean Leo to go to Purgatory City alone with you."

"But where is this train you speak of?"

"It is encamped on the mountain overhanging the valley, and leaves at dawn for the settlement; will you do as I ask?"

"If it is to free the land of Jean Leo, yes, for he is a blot upon the earth, and, with his Danite hounds is only watching his chance to lay the valley in waste, and seize the riches of the settlers."

"Do as I ask you, and Jean Leo's days are numbered, I pledge you, for I have a plan by which the Death Cavern can be made the Danites' tomb."

"Enough, I obey your request, be the risk what it may; what is my disguise?"

"The Danite League has a law that prevents any of their number, even their chief, from removing the black mask from one's face, I believe?"

"Yes, if the mask is one used by the League."

"Is this like it?" and the Hermit Huntress held forth a mask.

"It is black, and the shape," answered Oll.

"Feel, here is the skull, and here the crossbones embroidered on the forehead."

"Yes, I can see them."

"And here is the black robe of the order; put this on, and with the mask you are disguised, and you can say that Rocky Mountain Ike gave you them to protect you."

"I will go," and Oll put on the mask and threw the cloak over his shoulders.

"Now give me the letter, and say where I am to meet you."

"Here is the letter, and to-morrow night, you

and Jean Leo meet me at the Miner's Rest in Purgatory City."

"But Jean Leo will be recognized as a stranger."

"He can say that he is a miner that has been trying to overtake the train; be careful, do not lose your nerve, and all will be well."

Oll waved his hand in farewell, and the next moment was lost to sight in the darkness of the cavern, while Mad Myra turned to find herself confronted by Velvet Face.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

THE DANITE CHIEF.

WHEN Jean Leo, the Danite Chief, returned from his tragic chase with the bloodhounds, he sought the rock chamber, where Muriel had been under the espionage of the Mexican woman, and said:

"Luel, I have no need of your services, as the girl cannot be found, and I shall resume my quarters again."

"Si, señor chief," replied the woman, and trimming the lamp that burned on a shelf of rock, she departed, leaving the masked chief pacing the floor in deep meditation.

"Oh, curses on my ill-fortune! a second time in my power, and again she has escaped," he muttered.

"But death has freed her this time, I am sure, for my spy in the valley reports that she has not returned there."

"A sad fate, to die in this cavern, alone and hunted, for one so young and beautiful as Muriel Merle."

"Ah me, I really do love her, and had she remained, I intended giving up my wild career here, and going with her far away, to live in luxury with the gold I have made—yes, made by treachery and bloodshed—ay, bloodshed enough to cover every ounce of the yellow metal with red stains."

"No, no, my Prophet, Muriel Merle was not a gem for your wearing, as you thought, and commanded, when I told you of her beauty; no, no, she was the bright star of my destiny, and she has gone down in gloom—Great God! can she still be in some secret part of this cavern, roaming about a madwoman, from the scenes she has witnessed?"

"The thought is fearful, and I would rather have her dead than mad."

He paced the floor more quickly with his intense thoughts, and his lips became firm set as he brooded in silence.

Suddenly he started, for he heard a light step behind him, and beheld before him, as he turned, a form clad in the robe of the secret order, and with the black mask concealing the face.

"Well, who is it of the League that seeks me here?" he asked, sternly.

"I am one who bears to you a letter, chief, one raised in the creed of the Mormon, but a dweller among Gentiles, and whom chance threw in the way of a dying Danite on the mountain trail."

"Ha! who was this Danite?"

"He was known as Rocky Mountain Ike."

"What! no, no, he is in the States with Danite Dick on secret service," said the chief, suspiciously.

"He was, chief, but he came West with a train."

"And how knew you how to reach me here?" asked Jean Leo, with increased suspicion.

"Rocky Mountain Ike directed me to the cavern, and told me how to follow the right-hand passage wall, that would bring me here."

"Ah! and how know you that I am Jean Leo?"

"I have seen you often in the Mormon City, and your form and bearing I would know among a thousand men, for there is but one other I have seen like you."

"And who is that one?"

"Men name him Velvet Face, the Border Bravo."

"I have seen him, and I have cause to remember him; where is he now?"

"In the Paradise Valley, where I dwell."

"And how found you Rocky Mountain Ike in the mountains?"

"I was prospecting for gold, and came upon him; he had been in a struggle with a bear, but had received death-wounds, after he had slain the brute; I can lead you to the place where they are."

"No; and yet, from some reason I doubt you, and yet dare not remove the mask you wear."

"But the letter I bear, chief, which is from Danite Dick, who lies sick."

"Strange indeed that misfortune should overtake both of my men; but give me the letter."

Oll silently obeyed, and the chief glanced over it, and said, as he read it through:

"It is Danite Dick's writing, and it looks safe to do as he asks; I will accompany you, but if you mean treachery, I shall kill you, be my fate what it may."

"I know how the Danites punish treachery, chief."

"Ha! how you know this?"

"He whom I called father was a Danite."

"Indeed! and what is the punishment meted out to traitors?"

"To be buried alive."

"In Satan's name, who are you that knows this secret of our League?"

"The League law forbids the question, chief."

"True; I had forgotten for the instant, and I hold your mask sacred."

"Now, when shall we go to Paradise Valley? for I shall accompany you to see Danite Dick."

"It would be better to arrive there after dark to-morrow night."

"Yes, for I like darkness rather than light; but in what disguise?"

"That of a miner will best suit you, chief."

"Yes; now seek rest there, and to-morrow afternoon we depart together; but stay, when did you leave the valley?"

"Some thirty hours ago."

"And do you know Malcolm Merle, the owner of Dead Man's Mine?"

"Yes, chief."

"He has lost a daughter?"

"Yes, Muriel Merle."

"Does he know her fate?"

"No, chief, and he is almost crazed with sorrow, for she disappeared in a most mysterious manner."

"Then she has not returned home?"

"Not when I left, chief."

"Then she is dead; curses on that Paul Reno, for through his treachery was she lost to me; ay, curse him in his grave," said Jean Leo, breaking out savagely, as was sometimes his wont.

"Dead! is Paul Reno dead, chief?" asked Oll, suddenly.

"Yes; he proved a traitor, and he was—"

"Great Heaven! buried alive!" cried the youth, in a tone of horror.

"Yes; he lies at present in the iron coffin, and my curses be upon him; but did you know him, boy, or man, whichever you be?"

"Yes," came the answer, in a low tone.

"Was he ought to you, that you seem shocked at his fate?"

"Yes," came in the same low, sad tone.

"What was he to you?"

"He was the one I called father."

"What! Paul Reno your father? I knew not that he had a son," cried the chief, in surprise, and the youth answered, evasively:

"There are Mormon mysteries that even the Danites do not know."

"You speak the truth, boy, as I well know; but if Paul Reno was your father who was your mother?"

"The League law of the Danites forbids you, chief, to raise the veil of secrecy, if one of the name desires it unknown."

"Pardon me, I erred again; it matters not who was your mother; but your father was certainly a magnificent devil; well, there is a cot for you, if you wish rest, and sleep will come to you when you know what was Paul Reno's fate," and, with a harsh laugh, Jean Leo left the rock chamber, while Oll, still wrapped in his cloak and wearing his mask, sunk down upon the bed of skins, his whole form trembling with emotion, for, only a few days before had he saved Paul Reno from hanging at the hands of the Vigilantes of Paradise Valley.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

DISCARDED.

MINER'S REST was a general resort for the settlers of the valley and the denizens of Purgatory City, of a sportive nature, after the day's work was ended.

An enterprising personage, with an eye to his own welfare and the gold-dust of the diggers, had built what he termed a saloon and gambling room combined, but which consisted of a pine wood counter on which stood tin cups, a shelf, upon which were jugs of liquor, and a dozen plain tables, worn smooth by the constant card-playing upon them to which they were nightly subjected.

Such was Miner's Rest, and though a mere shanty, many thousands of dollars in yellow metal changed hands there nightly, and many a thrilling scene had been therein enacted.

Upon the night following the escape of Muriel from the Death Cavern of the Danites, Miner's Rest was the point of destination for nearly every male personage in the valley and in Purgatory City, in the very center of which hamlet it was situated, for the return of Muriel, rescued from the Danites by Velvet Face and Ralph Reno had been reported, and the news spread like wildfire, while another train of wagons having arrived in the settlement, the citizens wished to talk over the rapid growth and prospects of their far-away mountain retreat.

Toward sunset on the day of her arrival at home, after a fond welcome, substantial food, and a long rest, Muriel had gone out upon the piazza to join her father and Camille, upon whose faces a look of joy rested at her being once more in their midst.

"Please, father, don't spoil me, for I am not an invalid, and I feel myself again, after Camille's good nursing to-day," said Muriel, as

her father and cousin seemed bent upon making an invalid of her.

"We are so happy in having you back, Mu, we wish to have you in the big easy-chair, where we can see you; but see how the miners are flocking down to Purgatory City this evening to talk over your return, and many have stopped to congratulate us, and they look upon Velvet Face as some one of a supernatural order, to rescue you from the Danites," said Camille, running on gayly.

"He is a most remarkable man, and, after all I suffered, had he not been there when I awoke the guard at the cavern entrance, I would have been lost; in fact, I do not believe my strength would have lasted me a league from the spot, so I owe my life to him," remarked Miss Merle, feelingly.

"I wish he would come so we could thank him; ah, there comes Reno, and we shall know about him, now."

As Mr. Merle spoke, Ralph Reno rode up to the rustic piazza and raised his sombrero, the act displaying the long hair which the night's sorrows had whitened, and his face was haggard and sad.

"I hope you are better, Miss Merle; you have recuperated rapidly," he said, in a tone of forced calmness.

"Yes, I am well again, for the day has done wonders for me; but, dismount and take supper with us," and, as Mr. Merle and Camille also urged it, the Guide allowed the grinning Washee Washee to take his horse, and he sat down in a chair next to Muriel.

"There comes Mr. Godfrey, and Hazel, too," said Mr. Merle, as the two pards approached the house, and warmly offered their congratulations to Muriel, but refused to remain to supper, also, as they said a meeting of importance was called for that night at Miner's Rest.

But hardly had they departed when two more persons came in sight, one of whom was Oll, of whose whereabouts Ralph Reno had said he had not been able to learn, although he had searched for him, after having carried Muriel home.

"But, who is it with him?" said Camille.

"I do not know him; doubtless one of the miners from the wagon train that arrived to-day," answered Ralph, as Oll left his comrade, a tall, heavily-bearded man in miner's attire, and wearing a slouch hat, with an extraordinarily wide brim, which was pulled down over his eyes.

As the youth approached the piazza, his companion waited for him in the road, and watched the party with a searching glance that seemed to make Muriel nervous, for she said:

"See how that man eyes us, father."

"I will ask Oll who he is—Ah, Oll, we thought you were lost."

"I was nearly so, sir, but I escaped; Miss Muriel, I am glad to see you home again; but, who can tell me where Velvet Face is?" and the youth spoke in a low tone.

"He returned in search of you last night, Oll, since when we have not seen him," replied Ralph Reno.

"And the Bannocks, Mr. Reno?"

"Are doubtless with him; but, who is your comrade, Oll?"

"A miner on his way to Purgatory City, having just arrived; but, Mr. Reno, be sure and come to the Miner's Rest to-night," and, with a significant glance at the Guide, the youth departed, and, joining his companion, they walked on and were soon lost to sight in the gathering twilight.

A short while after Washee announced supper, and, adjourning to the dining-room, they sat down to one of the substantial and tempting repasts for which Sunset Retreat was noted; but, while Muriel ate with an appetite that threatened, ere long, to make up for her days passed in starving, Ralph Reno hardly tasted his food, and it was evident that the sorrow had entered deep into his soul.

"I will go down and see what is going on at Purgatory City, and, if Velvet Face does not arrive to-morrow, I will head the miners in a march against the Death Cavern," said Ralph Reno, rising from the table, and, with a word of farewell, he departed.

But, hardly had the sound of his steed's hoof-falls died away, when there was heard the rapid clatter of several horses without, and drawing rein at the cabin the next moment, in strode the splendid form of Velvet Face.

"Ah, Miss Merle, it is a joy to see you in your home once more," he said, pleasantly, while, in a voice that trembled, Muriel replied:

"I owe it to you, sir."

"Not at all; it was your own splendid pluck that saved you."

"And we were most anxious about you, sir; but, sit down and have some supper with us, and invite your friends in, for you are not alone," said Mr. Merle.

"They have gone on to Purgatory City, where I must soon follow them; but I will accept your kind invitation, Mr. Merle, as a ride through the mountains has given me an appetite," and Velvet Face sat down to the table, while Mr. Merle arose and left the room at a call from Washee, that:

"Melican Dutchee man Yacob, Melican Irishman Murphee, and Melican blackee man Brickee wantee see bossee outsidee."

A moment after Camille also excused herself, and Muriel was left alone with the man who had twice saved her from worse than death, and whose image seemed ever to haunt her memory.

A few casual remarks, a short, thrilling narrative of all she had suffered during her imprisonment, and, with a sudden impulsiveness of manner that fairly startled her, and caused her to tremble violently, Velvet Face drew Muriel Merle to him, and said in impassioned tones:

"My brave, beautiful girl, you have suffered much in the past; but now live in the future, and let me be the one to shield you from all harm, for I love you, Muriel, as I knew not that man had power to love, and this night I close an account of vengeance that I have long been settling, and appear to you as I am, and no longer as one who holds no name."

He paused, for her white, scared face looked up into his own, and in a tone filled with what seemed to him horror, she cried:

"No! no! no! it can never be! do not ask it, but go, forget me, as I never can be your wife."

"Muriel Merle, do you mean this?" he asked, in deep, suppressed tones.

"I do, so help me God!"

"And you bid me go from you?" he asked, in the same tone.

"Yes, I bid you go," she said, in almost a whisper.

"I will obey you, Muriel; but remember that I love you until my love has become idolatrous worship, and I beg you to make me one promise."

"Name it!" and her voice had sunk to a whisper.

"If you need a friend, if harm befall you again, if I can in any way serve you, or, if you ever care to retract the words that send me from you to-night, I implore you to pledge yourself to send for me, to tell me."

"Yes."

"Do you give me the pledge, Muriel Merle?"

"Yes."

"Enough! now farewell," and he raised her face, and upon her quivering lips pressed a kiss ere she was aware—in fact she hardly knew it, as a moment after Camille entered the room to find her on the floor in a deep swoon, and alone, for Velvet Face had gone.

Checking the joyous words upon her lips, brought by Yacob Holstein, Murphy Maginnis, and Black Brick, that Dead Man's Mine had that day developed a new lead of rich ore, and would pan out a fortune, Camille threw herself by the side of her cousin, and called loudly for help, which was instantly answered by Mr. Merle and Washee Washee in wild alarm.

"Great Heavens! Camille, what has happened?"

"My cousin has fainted, sir!"

"Fainted! and where is Velvet Face?" and Mr. Merle bent over the prostrate form.

"He has gone, sir."

"Gone, and left Muriel in a swoon; Camille, Camille, what means all this mystery, and where will it all end?" and Malcolm Merle raised Muriel in his arms and bore her to her room, anxiously followed by Camille, while Washee muttered:

"Muchee funnee, muchee queeree; lovee makee Melican man madee, makee Melican girlee sickee, velly goodee for Chinaman; Melican folkee allee damee foolee allee samee."

With this philosophical decision Washee Washee bolted for the kitchen, where he had left Murphy Maginnis, Yacob Holstein and Black Brick paying all due devotion to his culinary skill, and praising his cooking, "if he was a fatter being a H'athen Chinese," as the Irishman complacently remarked.

CHAPTER XXXV.

DENOUNCED.

As a stream of humanity had poured into Miner's Rest since sunset, that vast shanty was tested to its utmost capacity to hold the motley throng, for motley it certainly was.

Red-shirted, heavily-bearded miners were congregated about the tables, playing cards for gold-dust; the denizens of Purgatory City crowded the bar, talking mining gossip and prospects, and groups of settlers, who tilled the rich valley lands, were conversing upon the propriety of moving in force against the Danite League and wiping it off the earth.

From the hardy boy miner, the sturdy farmer and the bloated loafer of the town to the sport, shopkeeper and bearded gold-digger, they were all there at the Miner's Rest, and evidently awaiting something of importance to turn up for their amusement or excitement.

At one table sat Guy Godfrey, Dick Hazel, Kansas Kit and Ralph Reno, the latter having just come in and joined the other three, and drawn universal comment upon his sad, haggard face and white locks, but which he seemed not to hear, or hearing, to disregard.

At another table sat Oll, the Waif, and his heavily-bearded companion, and the two were talking in a low tone together, until the door opened and three persons entered, and seeing

that their table had the least occupants, moved over and took seats at it, a circumstance that caused the conversation of the youth and his comrade to cease abruptly.

These three new-comers at once came in for a share of attention and liberal criticism, for they were Blue Snake, the Bannock chief, and his very pretty daughter Red Dove, and their companion no one seemed to know, for he was a youth who wore the dress and put on the airs of a sport, while he gracefully curled the ends of a dark mustache, as if very fond of it as an ornament.

That some miner intended to make a butt for ridicule out of this youthful exquisite was evident from the whispered comments running around the room; but the door opening there entered one who attracted every eye.

In the tall, splendid form, the fancy attire of a dandy plainsman, and the fascinating face of womanly beauty all present recognize Velvet Face, the Border Bravo, and a hum of admiration that went round the room grew louder and louder until it ended in a cheer, an honor which the recipient acknowledged by a smile and raising his sombrero.

"In God's name! who is that man?" gasped, rather than said the strange miner with Oll, the Waif.

"That is Velvet Face, the Bravo," replied the youth, quietly.

"That the man of whom so much has been said; strange, strange!" and the miner gazed upon the Border Bravo with a look that was unfathomable, while, catching his eye, Velvet Face walked over to where he sat, and, with a nod to the Indians and Oll, took the one vacant seat at the table.

Hardly had he taken his seat when Kansas Kit arose and, rapping on the table for silence, said in loud tones:

"Pards, yer all knows me, 'ceptin' a few strange faces I sees here, and which I reckons belongs ter ther new train as has comed inter ther valley, and I rises ter say thet it have been given round ter-day thet we wanted ther men o' ther settlement ter come heur ter-night, and I is glad ter see you is heur, for we has ter make a move ter wipe out a disgrace thet hes been upon us."

"What are thet, pard?" asked a miner in one end of the room, and a chorus of voices cried:

"Yes, what are i'?"

"Ther Danites!"

A silence fell upon all at that dreaded name, for the deeds of the past few weeks in the settlement had proven that a man hardly knew whether to trust his neighbor or not, as no one had suspected the two men whom Velvet Face had brought to them the day he saved the foreign element from the Vigilantes, and neither Lew Baker or Carl the Killer had been deemed members of that fearful League that all present had had such cause to dread.

"Waal, pards, has ther name o' Danite struck yer dumfounded?" asked Kansas Kit, as the silence continued.

"It isn't a pleasant name, pard Kit; but it's one can be wiped out from our fair valley and mountains if we start right on the trail of the red hounds," said Dick Hazel, rising, and a wild cheer followed his words, while Guy Godfrey, springing to his feet, cried:

"We are on the right trail now, and there is the man to follow the scent."

All eyes followed his own, and where he pointed, and it was upon Ralph Reno, and shouts arose for him to speak to them.

Calmly he stood up, and faced the crowd, and then in distinct tones that reached every ear, he said:

"Men, Kit and Hazel are right; the Danites are a curse to us that should be wiped out with a fearful reckoning, for your lives, and the lives and honor of your wives and daughters are not safe, with Jean Leo and his League within a few hours' ride of you."

"But, though I will gladly go with you upon the red trail, there is the one to lead you to success—Velvet Face, the Border Bravo!"

The yells that followed Ralph Reno's words were deafening, and it was some moments before silence was restored, and then Velvet Face arose and faced the excited crowd, while every eye was riveted upon him.

But not a muscle quivered, not a change passed over his handsome face, as he glanced upon the faces before him, and in his ringing tones said:

"Men, I thank Mr. Reno for the honor done me, and I thank you for your kind indorsement of his words, and I accept the title of leader, and, to prove that I will follow the Danite trail to the bitter end, now present to you their chief, Jean Leo."

As Velvet Face spoke, he suddenly leaned over, and by a dextrous movement tore from the strange miner with Oll the Waif the shaggy wig of hair and long beard he wore, and amazed, pallid, speechless, the face of a dark, handsome man was revealed, and upon its burning eyes were turned with looks that boded no good.

"He lies! I am no Danite," yelled Jean Leo, at last finding voice, and attempting to draw the two revolvers upon his hips; but his arms

were seized in a vise-like grasp, and he was shoved back in his seat, while in trumpet tones Velvet Face said:

"Auguste Lavasoir, do you dare say to me, Cecil Bertram, that you are not him whom men call Jean Leo?"

"God in heaven! does the tomb give up its dead, Cecil Bertram?" broke in horror-stricken tones from the lips of the man whom Velvet Face had called Auguste Lavasoir.

"No, you devil Danite, the grave does not give its dead back to life; but I did not die, as you hoped and believed."

"Men, this wretch, years ago, I saved from death, and we became friends in the California mines."

"I worked hard and dug out a fortune, with many others, while he idled away his time, and the gold I gave him he gambled away."

"At last our gold train started homeward; but this man, Auguste Lavasoir, had gone on ahead, and, with a band of renegade Mormons, he ambushed us in Echo Valley, and we were all shot down to die, and our gold they took."

"But I did not die, but lived to avenge that cruel butchery, for, one by one I have tracked those assassins over plain and mountain, and one by one I have slain them, until at last this man, their leader, has fallen into my hands, and when his life ends, my red work is done."

"Kill him!"

"Cut him in pieces!"

"Hang him up!"

The shouts grew louder and louder, and the mad mass of men pressed closer around the prisoner, whose face was now livid; but Velvet Face raised his hand and silence followed.

"Men, not now, but to-morrow, this man must die, and into the hands of the Vigilantes I will give him, for here is another whom he has bitterly wronged," and Velvet Face pointed to the handsome young sport, who had entered the Miner's Rest with Blue Snake and Red Dove.

"I never saw him before," said the Danite, with a glance of fear.

Instantly the young man arose and confronted Jean Leo, while he quickly removed the false mustache and the wig he wore, and said in a scornful tone:

"Now, Auguste Lavasoir, have you never seen me before?"

"Myra Mordaunt!" broke in a hoarse whisper from the man's pallid lips.

"Yes, I am Myra Mordaunt, your wife whom you cruelly left to die in the mountains, but whom these two Bannocks found, almost dying with cold and hunger, and nursed back to hunger, ay, to life, that I might see you die on the gallows, for I have lived but for that, as I am revengeful, for you dragged me from my far-away home in New England, and when you became rich, sought to get rid of me, that you might win other trusting hearts, to, in the end, drive them to mad despair, as you have driven me."

"Ha! ha! ha! Auguste Lavasoir, it will be sweet music to me when your death cry rings in my ears, and when I look down upon you dead, no longer will I be what my name signifies, *she who weeps*, for joy will well up in my heart to know that earth is rid of a blot so foul; ha! ha! ha! my brave, my gallant Lavasoir, the Mormon Danite, you little dreamed that Myra Mordaunt could laugh at your misery," and the poor creature, whose brain had been maddened by sorrow, and the cruel desertion of the man she loved, sunk down in her seat, and buried her face in her hands, while awe-struck and silent the motley crowd stood around Velvet Face and his prisoner, who gasped forth, catching as a drowning man will at a straw:

"No man dare say I am a Danite."

"I dare say so, Jean Leo," and Oll the Waif confronted the man whom he had entrapped to doom.

"You!" and the Danite's eyes glared upon him.

"Yes, I have seen you in Mormon City at the home of my mother, and the man I called my father; the man whose honeyed words caused my mother to fly from her happy home in Kansas, and carry me with her, to become what? a Mormon's wife, and one who cruelly treated her, until in the grave she found rest, and I was left a waif, as it were."

"But I fled from that land of crime and came here to wait until out of the mines I could dig enough gold to carry me back to my poor father, Kittredge Kane, in Kansas, and ask him to take his child back to his heart."

"Who calls Kittredge Kane here?—for I answer to that name, or did long ago," and Kansas Kit sprung forward, his face very pale, for he had heard the words of the youth.

"I spoke the name, sir; but my father, as I remember him, wore no beard, and was so handsome and good," said the youth, softly.

"And I wore no beard then, and my little child was wont to call me handsome; but she was a little girl, and her name was Ollivette."

"And I am a girl, and my name is Ollivette," almost screamed the one whom all had looked upon as a boy, and she sprung forward to be clasped in the strong arms of Kansas Kit, while down many a hardened face rolled pearly

teardrops at the scene between the long-separated father and daughter, and even the stern face of Blue Snake, the Bannock, relaxed as he gazed upon the thrilling tableau, and but one remained unmoved, and that one was the crime-stained, hopeless Danite chief.

CHAPTER XXXVI. A RECOGNITION.

NEITHER Purgatory City citizens, the settlers in Paradise Valley, or the denizens of the mining camps, thought of repose, that night of the thrilling scenes described in the foregoing chapter as having transpired in the Miner's Rest.

But, having taken the leadership in the affair, Velvet Face at once had a secret conference with Blue Snake, the result of which was that the chief, accompanied by Red Dove and Mad Myra the Huntress, left the town fully armed and mounted on fleet horses, and lay in ambush in the vicinity of the Death Cavern, to head off any one who might seek to warn the Danites of coming danger.

Then, into the hands of well-known miners, Jean Leo, and his ally, Danite Dick, who was also captured, were placed for safe-keeping until the morrow, and Velvet Face, with Ralph Reno to aid him, set about organizing a determined band to move against the Death Cavern, and, at midnight, two hundred resolute men rode away from Purgatory City, and, at a rapid gallop, headed for the secret retreat of the League.

Just at dawn they reached the cavern entrance, and, under the guidance of Ollivette, still in her boy attire, and close at whose side her father rode, the Vigilantes entered the cave, with Velvet Face at their head, and Ralph Reno, his second in command, while detachments were under the leadership of Guy Godfrey, Dick Hazel, and Kansas Kit.

But, as they moved through the subterranean vaults and aisles, the heavy tread of hundreds of hoofs awoke thundering echoes in the vast cavern, and aroused the sleeping Danites, who rallied to meet their foes, and hot and fierce waged the combat in the heart of the huge mountain, which fairly trembled with the shock of trampling feet and roar of firearms, while the shouts of the combatants, and flashes of the weapons made it seem as though devils and demons had met for a struggle for mastery in hell itself.

But, thoroughly organized, having the advantage of surprising their foes, and with superior numbers, the Vigilantes cut down all opposition, and put the leaderless Danites to flight with fearful loss.

Hotly pressed, the remaining Danites scattered through the mountains, and the few who gained Mormon City had a tale of bitter woe to tell to their Prophets, of how they had been almost annihilated by the very people it had been their intention to one day descend upon with fire and sword.

Loaded down with booty, the result of the Danites' robberies for years, and horror-stricken at the discoveries made in the Death Cavern, of crimes committed, the Vigilantes, bearing with them their wounded, returned to Paradise Valley, and the mountains echoed back again and again the shouts of joy.

But the end was not yet, for the Danite Chief yet lived, and all awaited the word of Velvet Face to lead forth to execution the noted Jean Leo, the hero of a hundred red deeds.

And toward Death Canyon flowed the stream of humanity to witness the death of the Danite Chief, and, drawn irresistibly there, by a fascination they made no effort to resist, were Malcolm Merle, Muriel, and Camille.

At length they beheld Jean Leo and Danite Dick mount the impromptu scaffold, the former calm, but livid, the latter trembling with dread, and then from the lips of Malcolm Merle broke the cry:

"Good God! Muriel, that man is Philip Barton!"

A shriek from Muriel, a stern order from Velvet Face, and the Danite Chief and his ally were swung off into eternity, the rope choking back the scornful laugh of Jean Leo.

One shout of joy, as the end had come at last, and the denizens of Paradise Valley filed slowly homeward, many wondering at the wild shriek of Muriel Merle, when she saw the Danite Chief launched into eternity; but to them the mystery of the past was not made known, for there was a secret yet to bury from the public gaze.

And yet to one man that story of the past was told, and listening, Velvet Face heard how, two years before, a California miner had come to New York, and, by playing his cards well, had entrapped Malcolm Merle into his net, and forced him to give him his daughter in marriage.

The ceremony had been performed, a private one, and, as the fatal words that bound Muriel Merle to Philip Barton grew cold on the minister's lips, a warrant of arrest was served upon the bridegroom, who was charged with a murder in a Western State, and, ere one word was spoken to his beautiful bride, he was dragged away to prison.

And, with this shock, Velvet Face heard that another followed, for the treacherous bridegroom, had given checks on the banking-house

of Merle & Co. for all he had deposited there, and, unexpecting them, and unprepared to meet them, the house had been ruined, and the poor banker was almost penniless.

But his noble daughter and his niece cheered him in his sorrow, and a few months after westward they wended their way, little dreaming that Philip Barton had escaped from prison, and was then safe among his Danite band, and was watching, through spies, the man he had ruined, and the beautiful girl he had so cruelly deceived.

In silence Velvet Face heard the story from the lips of Malcolm Merle, and then his eyes fell upon the pale face of Muriel, who at once arose and approached him, while she said in her full rich tones:

"Cecil Bertram, I made you a pledge the night you went from here to Miner's Rest, and I now keep it, for I retract my words that drove you from me, and tell you now that I love you with all my heart, and refused your devoted love, because I was the wife of Philip Barton, the Danite."

CONCLUSION.

Were you, kind reader, to wander now amid the scenes of my romance of a quarter of a century ago, you would scarcely recognize in the city of to-day, the Purgatory City of then, and the farm-dotted valley of now is no longer the home of the red-shirted miner.

But there are faces you would meet there that have not changed, other than by the finger-touches Time has left upon them, and at a glance you would recognize in that kindly-faced man and the lovely woman seated by his side upon the broad piazza of their elegant home, Cecil Bertram, he who was once known as Velvet Face, the Border Bravo, and his wife, Muriel, once the Danite's Bride.

And over on the hill is another home where dwells a man whose hair is white, though his step is firm, and his form upright, and in him, and the sharer of his joys and sorrows, memory would recall to you Ralph Reno and Ollivette Kane.

In the city, of the one-time diabolical cognomen, and a few miles down the valley, is a lordly house, upon the the door-plate of which is the name:

"GUY GODFREY."

If you ask any citizen he will tell you that the young school-teacher of years ago is a judge now, and that his wife was Miss Camille Conrad.

Glancing far up the mountain-side a column of blue smoke is visible, curling upward from a neat cabin, before the door of which several young people are making baskets and beading moccasins to sell; and these wild-looking creatures, whose complexion is of a hue indescribable, acknowledge their descent from Washee Washee, the Heathen Chinese, and Red Dove, the pretty Bannock girl, whose heart surrendered before the sly glances of the almond-eyed native of the Celestial empire.

From the homes of the living, kind reader, let us follow the trail leading to the village of the dead, and cast our eyes around upon the marble slabs that tell their own story of who have journeyed on before.

There, on that tall marble column you see the name of Malcolm Merle; here, beneath this solid stone and brick tomb, rests Kittredge Kane, he that was once known as Kansas Kit; this violet-covered mound, with its simple white cross, bears the name of Mad Myra, the Hermit Huntress, and yonder at the foot of that large tree is another grave that contains the moldering remnant of noble-hearted Dick Hazel, to his dying day the devoted lover of Camille Conrad, and, poor fellow, whose

"Heart was broken,
Head was turned,
Building castles in the air."

THE END.

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